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School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures

PhD in Comparative Literature and Cultures

**Criminology, Gothic, and the Supernatural in  
Italian Crime Fiction (1861-1914)**

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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Royal Holloway, September 2019



**Declaration of Authorship**

I Stefano Serafini hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides the first extensive exploration of Italian crime fiction in the years that span between national unification in 1861 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. This is a transformative yet problematic period in Italian history, marked by political turmoil and social instability, turbulent processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, shifts in sexual and domestic organisation, controversial scientific discoveries, but also by a pervasive tension between the rational and supernatural, in which apparently incompatible fields such as science, technology, spiritualism, and mesmerism interacted and intertwined. Positivist criminology, which directly participated in the construction and normalisation of the new body politic by re-conceptualising the idea of delinquency while also turning to the scientific study of occult manifestations, perfectly encapsulates such ambivalence. Given its prominent role in the process of nation-building, its dialectical and ambiguous relationship with the occult as well as its inherently Gothic nature, positivist criminology constitutes the privileged angle from which to look at how different discourses on criminality engendered a multifarious response in the field of literary fiction.

In this thesis, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach, framing readings of literary works with the study of contemporaneous developments in criminology, with a view to provide a fuller and more nuanced picture of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian culture and literature. The aim of this thesis is twofold. First, it seeks to reassess the history and development of a literary form that has long been dismissed for being merely escapist, unproblematic, and conservative. I will bring to light an aesthetically and ideologically complex and even confrontational body of work, which taps into fears of gender, class fluidity, deviant selfhood and problems of insanity, and the unaccomplished disjunction of science and occultism. Second, it aims to provide new insights into the relationship between science and literature, by intervening in the ongoing debates concerning the ambiguity of positivist criminologists' work and legacy. Far from merely reflecting reality, crime literature intrudes upon science, manipulates its most controversial outcomes, and fuels socio-cultural fears and anxieties.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of its national unification in 1861, Italy was still a project whose content and forms were vague and often contradictory. The establishment of a unified nation in a territory that had known a quite diverse history throughout the centuries proved extremely complicated. Many divisive factors – linguistic, regional, religious – made liberal hegemony rather weak from the beginning and generated anxieties and discontent. One of the most pressing problems faced by the ruling class was that of violent crime, which was seen as the principal cause of the country's chronic instability. Official administrators had not only to fight the phenomenon of brigandage, which plagued especially Southern Italy in the 1860s and 1870s, forcing the government to declare a state of emergency in many regions and to allow military intervention. They also had to deal with the exponential increase, particularly noticeable in the largest and most developing cities, of various forms of criminality, including organised crime.<sup>1</sup>

Against this background of disorder, social unrest, and political uncertainty, it is unsurprising that crime came to hold a central place in the politics and culture of the new state. The Italian government urgently demanded a rational strategy to prevent what was perceived as a rising tide of criminals from undermining the new socio-political order. The foundation of the school of positivist criminology, established in the 1870s by the physician Cesare Lombroso, must be seen as a direct

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of the centrality of the problem of crime in post-unification political discourses see John Davis, *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), p. 2; Paolo Marchetti, 'Le "sentinelle del male". L'invenzione ottocentesca del criminale nemico della società tra naturalismo giuridico e normativismo psichiatrico', *Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno*, 38 (2009), 1009-80 (p. 1028); Paul Garfinkel, *Criminal Law in Liberal and Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 55.

attempt to neutralise such threat.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on positivist approaches – a philosophical theory that by the late 1860s had become the official culture of the governing elite – Lombroso published in 1876 the first version of his major work, *L'uomo delinquente*, aiming to establish the study of criminal behaviour on strictly scientific foundations through an analysis that gave priority to biological causes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) was a physician and criminologist. He certainly was one of the most significant, fascinating, and controversial personalities in the entire history of criminology, as well as a towering figure in Italian culture between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Lombroso initially called his field of study 'criminal anthropology' to underscore the focus on man, but an important proponent of positivist approaches to crime, Raffaele Garofalo, called it simply 'criminology' in his seminal *Criminologia: studio sul delitto, sulle sue cause e sui mezzi di repressione* (Turin: Bocca, 1885) and the term gained acceptance afterwards. Like most scholars, I will use here the general label 'positivist criminology'. Amongst the numerous recent studies devoted to Lombroso and positivist criminology see Mary Gibson, *Born to Crime: Cesare Lombroso and the Origins of Biological Criminology* (Westport: Praeger, 2002); Delia Frigessi, *Cesare Lombroso* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003); David G. Horn, *The Criminal Body. Lombroso and the Anatomy of Deviance* (London: Routledge, 2003); *Cesare Lombroso cento anni dopo*, ed. by Silvano Montaldo and Paolo Tappero (Turin: UTET, 2009); *The Cesare Lombroso Handbook*, ed. by Per Jørgen Ystehede and Paul Knepper (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> In 1876, the pivotal year of his life, Lombroso was appointed as professor of legal medicine at the University of Turin. This was also the year in which he published the first edition of *L'uomo delinquente*, the book that eventually made him world famous. The core of his criminology, as legend has it, first came to him when studying the skull of Giuseppe Vilella, a brigand from Calabria, in 1871. During the examination of his skull, Lombroso discovered a certain impression, referred to as the median occipital fossa, which he also found in the skulls of inferior animals, especially rodents. Accordingly, he argues that the phenomenon of delinquency is the product of atavism, that is an arrested development at a more primitive mental stage. In the 1876 edition of *L'uomo delinquente*, Lombroso argues for the existence of the born-criminal, whose propensity to offend is innate, constitutional, and hence incurable. His revisions of this work came at regular intervals over a period of twenty years, with the second in 1878, the third in 1884, the fourth in 1889, and the last in 1896, each one longer and broader in scope as he progressively expanded and complicated his theory. In successive versions, Lombroso identified different categories of criminals and multiple factors producing crimes, including social ones such as immigration into the cities, population density, and alcohol consumption. Throughout his career, Lombroso rethought but did not abandon his original emphasis on atavism and the biological roots of delinquency. For him, the dichotomy between normal people and criminals is mirrored in offenders' external manifestations. Unlike traditional and simplistic accounts of Lombrosian criminology continue to suggest, his research focused not only on criminals' faces or their cranial shapes, but on all physical and psychological characteristics, including their verbal (slang) and non-verbal (tattoos) manifestations, and even their artefacts. Stigmata of criminal behaviour, then, are both on the body and produced by the body. Lombroso's science remains ultimately unsystematic, volatile, often self-contradictory yet enormously influential and long-lasting. This is precisely why the literary products that his



He popularised the concept of the ‘born criminal’, whose supposed innate propensity for criminal behaviours was explained by his reversion to a subhuman type of man, characterised by physical features reminiscent of savages and primitive people.<sup>4</sup>

Positivist criminologists used the criminal body as the privileged locus for measuring the health of the Italian state and civilisation. The chimera of national unity was their implicit concern. As David G. Horn puts it, Lombroso sought to ‘locate Italy in relation to other – more uniformly modern – nations in Europe, and to draw boundaries around an imagined Italian citizenry’.<sup>5</sup> The role of positivist criminology in the construction and modernisation of the state was crucial. At a time when impersonal forces – the growth of the new metropolis, in particular – threatened the very notion of individuality, this emerging scientific field realised a cultural and political project that aimed to monitor the modern subject, identify the menacing ‘other’, and medically and politically exclude it from the rest of society. Comprehensibly, Lombroso’s theory of criminality was extremely controversial, and it sparked heated and long-lasting debates and discussions, both within and outside the scientific community, which still echo in contemporary criminological

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science emanated were extremely diverse and profoundly revealing of the socio-cultural climate of the time.

<sup>4</sup> Evolutionist ideas were being discussed throughout Europe and the United States, and Lombroso drew on a common pool of intellectual influences, including anthropology, degeneration theory, phrenology, physiognomy, and scientific racism. There is a debate about the principal sources of influence for the development of Lombroso’s thought. According to Gibson, ‘Lombroso drew on the popularity and prestige of Charles Darwin to build an evolutionary scaffold that ranked certain groups as more successful in the struggle for existence than others’. Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859) was translated into Italian in 1864 and ‘by 1870, almost all positivists were converted to Darwinism’. Gibson, *Born to Crime*, pp. 3, 19. Frigessi, on the contrary, belittles the role of Darwin and emphasises the role of German materialism, Italian pre-Darwinian evolutionist theory, especially the work of the physiologist Jacob Moleschott (1822-1893), and the theorisations of the zoologist Giovanni Canestrini (1835-1900). See Frigessi, *Cesare Lombroso*, pp. 54-7.

<sup>5</sup> Horn, *The Criminal Body*, p. 33.

discourses.<sup>6</sup>

In this period, the boundaries between scientific and literary imaginaries were particularly permeable, and as such the exchanges between positivist criminology and literature were anything but unidirectional. In order to spread and popularise his ideas, Lombroso published over a thousand articles during his life in at least seventy journals, many of them, like *Nuova antologia*, aimed at the general educated public. Many of his disciples, moreover, produced numerous literary works of science as well as criminological studies of literature and art.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Italian authors variously experimented with the narrative possibilities offered by the latest scientific discoveries, whose scope and diversity proved elastic and ambiguous enough to provide them with new models and themes.

As scholars have shown, the close relationship between Lombrosian criminology and Gothic imagination is particularly striking.<sup>8</sup> Karen Halttunen, for

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<sup>6</sup> In these years, as we shall see throughout this work, Lombroso's theorisations sparked lively debates concerning the criminogenic factors underpinning delinquency. Lombroso's intention was to establish and change criminal policies and influence judicial practices arguing for the existence of biological determinants as causes of crime. Positivism thus rejected the concept of free will and, with it, the religious idea of guilt. In their critique of the free will, positivist criminologists were at odds not only with classical jurisprudence, which had its roots in Cesare Beccaria's eighteenth-century theorisations, but also with the Catholic Church. Much of the conflict between criminologists and jurists was motivated by the attempt at influencing the promulgation of the first Italian criminal code, which eventually came into effect in 1889. Lombroso dreamed of modernising the criminal justice system so that it would incorporate his ideas and react to offenders according to their degree of innate dangerousness. Not only positivist criminologists, though, but also jurists and legal experts blamed the criminal justice system for Italy's apparently intractable violent-crime problem, pinpointing judicial underperformance, the understaffing of judicial officers and police forces, the slow duration of trials, and the government's failure to reform the prison system as primary reasons. See Garfinkel, *Criminal Law in Liberal and Fascist Italy*, pp. 104-5; Patrizia Guarnieri, 'Alienists on Trial: Conflict and Convergence Between Psychiatry and Law (1876-1913)', *History of Science*, 29.4 (1991), 393-410.

<sup>7</sup> Lombroso's research attracted a variety of researchers to the University of Turin, where they formed the nucleus of his positivist school of criminology. In 1880, he founded the seminal journal *Archivio di psichiatria, antropologia criminale e scienze penali* to serve as an outlet for his own work and that of his followers.

<sup>8</sup> There is no single and straightforward definition of the Gothic, a multifaceted and hybrid mode of writing that seeks to destabilize paradigms of realism, rationality, and morality.

instance, suggests that Gothic discourses on the construction of otherness influenced criminological thinking in the late nineteenth century, transforming the transgressor from a ‘common sinner with whom the larger community of sinners were urged to identify in the service of their own salvation’ into a moral monster ‘from whom readers were instructed to shrink, with a sense of horror that confirmed their own “normalcy” in the face of the morally alien’.<sup>9</sup> For Nicole Rafter and Per Ystehede, the figure of the born-criminal, a racial as well as historical other, is a Gothic creation, redolent of death and the uncanny: like a Gothic scientist, Lombroso conjured up mentally warped and physically hideous figures in order to call for more drastic forms of social control.<sup>10</sup> A variety of Gothic elements – skulls and brains, anatomical and physiological anomalies, cruelty and savagery, insane criminals who drink the blood of their victims – abound in Lombroso’s work. Like the Gothic, his narratives destabilised accepted boundaries and traditional assumptions about human identity and sexuality, cataloguing the way in which the human form can be violated. In his work, as Rafter and Ystehede conclude, ‘Gothic anxieties become scientific concerns’.<sup>11</sup> The relationship between science and Gothicism was far from unilateral. Criminology, in fact, greatly shaped Gothic discourses. As Fred Botting argues, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a major shift in Gothic writing, in which the form became marked primarily by the

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Fred Botting defines it a mobile and specific form that constantly crosses the boundaries and that, in generating and refracting diverse objects of fear and anxiety, continuously transforms its own shape and focus. Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul. The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Nicole Rafter and Per Ystehede, ‘Here Be Dragons: Lombroso, the Gothic, and Social Control’, in *Popular Culture, Crime, and Social Control*, ed. by Mathieu Deflem (Bingley: Emerald, 2010), pp. 263-84 (p. 270).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

domestication of its figures, spaces, and themes.<sup>12</sup> Horrors and terrors become explicitly located within the realm of the contemporary reader – the bourgeois domestic world or the new urban landscape – and reflect anxieties about ‘the stability of the social and domestic order and the effect of economic and scientific rationality’.<sup>13</sup> Scientific theories and technological innovation provided a vocabulary and objects of fear for Gothic writing: Darwinian models of evolution identified the bestial within the human, contributing to intensifying as well as internalising concerns about degeneration, while criminological researches explained forms of sexual deviance, abnormality, and criminal behaviour as a pathological return of animalistic, instinctual habits.<sup>14</sup>

This period was also marked by a pervasive tension between the rational and supernatural, in which apparently incompatible fields such as science, technology, spiritualism, and mesmerism tended to mingle.<sup>15</sup> Positivist criminology, which directly participated in the normalisation of the new body politic by re-conceptualising the idea of delinquency while also turning to the scientific study of

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<sup>12</sup> See Botting, *Gothic*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Monstrosities which disturb the taxonomies of natural history are, paradoxically, legitimated by the Darwinian version of natural history, and in Gothic natural history, the anomalous is reframed as the normal’. Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Advances in the fields of science, medicine, and technology were made alongside research into the spiritual and the occult. Inventions such as laryngoscopes and stomach illuminations allowed doctors to explore the inside of the living body, while, at the same time, clairvoyants claimed to identify diseases through their gaze. The Society for Psychical Research, which was founded in London in 1882, applied rational and scientific methods in order to study occult phenomena such as clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition. Photography, which broadened the realm of the visible and proved to be an instrumental tool in distributing scientific knowledge, as in the case of bacteriology, became at the same time a crucial resource for spiritualists, who saw it as a proof for psychic phenomenology. See Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Alessandra Violi, ‘Storie di fantasmi per adulti: Lombroso e le tecnologie dello spettrale’, in *Lombroso e la fotografia*, ed. by Silvana Turzio (Milan: Mondadori, 2005), pp. 43-69.

occult manifestations, perfectly encapsulates such ambivalence.<sup>16</sup> Science opened new unexpected paths into the occult by virtue of its investigation of objects and phenomena that elude the limited register of the bodily senses. As Martin Willis remarks, although many questioned the scientific status of occult practices such as mesmerism and spiritualism, ‘there was no unequivocal position from which these beliefs could be denied a place within the scientific hierarchy’.<sup>17</sup> In this climate of uncertainty, literature took part in the conflict, eagerly and variously responding to the enormous interest in the unaccomplished disjunction of science and the occult, rational and irrational practices, thriving on and shaping the contemporary debates over the destabilising presence of the supernatural in everyday life.

Starting from these premises, this thesis provides the first extensive exploration of the diverse and complex panorama of crime narratives in Italy in the years that span between national unification in 1861 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.<sup>18</sup> This is a transformative yet problematic and surprisingly under-studied period in Italian literary history, marked by political turmoil and social instability, turbulent processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, shifts in sexual and domestic organisation, and controversial scientific discoveries. These years also saw a rapid growth in industry and technological improvements in the printing process, which greatly contributed to the rise of the printed media and the

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<sup>16</sup> See Per Jørgen Ystehede, ‘Demonizing Being, Lombroso and the Ghosts of Criminology’, in *The Cesare Lombroso Handbook*, pp. 72-97.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines: Science Fiction and the Culture of Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> While my principal focus is on literature written in this period, I also recognise and cut across strict boundaries, occasionally mentioning and analysing texts published in the 1850s or the 1920s.

emergence of popular forms of literature that inevitably changed the literary marketplace and shaped the taste of a gradually emerging readership.<sup>19</sup>

Given its prominent role in the process of nation-building, its dialectical and ambiguous relationship with the occult as well as its inherently Gothic nature, positivist criminology constitutes the privileged angle from which to look at how different discourses on criminality engendered a multifarious response in the field of literary fiction. Criminal narratives have existed throughout history, but such material proliferated and reached new heights of complexity as well as popularity towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the interest in criminal matters shifted from the criminal deed to the criminal man, from the act of punishment to the act of detection, from the consequences of wrongdoing to its very roots.

In this research, I will explore the long process leading up to what is generally considered the official birth of the *giallo*, focusing on the years that critics

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<sup>19</sup> The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of great advancement in both the production and consumption of culture. The patterns of production, circulation, readership of texts, and spectatorship were diverse and heterogeneous, but it is in this period that a perception of a national audience emerged more clearly, shaping Italy's national cultural identity. From the 1860s, the demand for printed media began to increase dramatically, and at the turn of the century the existence of a reading public was much larger and more extensive within urban Italy than the crude statistics of illiteracy would suggest. The coeval emergence of modern journalism and the increasing circulation of popular novels, particularly translations of French *feuilletons*, eagerly consumed by the bourgeois and the new mass literate readership brought about by the passing of the Casati law in 1859 and the Coppino law in 1877, drastically changed the marketplace and the relationship between writers and readers. Literature entered fully into the troubled arena of tensions between the commercial demands of publishers and readers and the aristocratic ones of critics and writers influenced by the aesthetics of the *fin-de-siècle*. Writers began to experiment with narrative modes, combining and hybridising popular and elitist forms in order to revitalize the Italian novel and render it appealing to the ordinary people. To understand this long process of cultural transformations, see Giovanni Ragone, *Un secolo di libri: storia dell'editoria in Italia dall'unità al post-moderno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), p. 29; John Davis, 'Media, Markets, and Modernity: The Italian Case, 1870-1915', in *The Printed Media in Fin-de-Siècle Italy: Publishers, Writers, and Readers*, ed. by Ann Hallamore Caesar, Gabriella Romani, and Jennifer Burns (London: Legenda, 2011), pp. 10-19 (p. 16); *The Formation of a National Audience in Italy, 1750-1890. Readers and Spectators of Italian Culture*, ed. by Gabriella Romani and Jennifer Burns (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2017).

prevalently see as interstitial and essentially fruitless in the history of Italian crime fiction. This is precisely why I will delve into extremely rich and variegated yet largely uncharted literary landscapes. In the next section, I will carry out a comprehensive review of critical literature on Italian crime fiction, before outlining the coordinates and approaches of my project and laying out its structure.

### **Crime Fiction in Italian Studies**

One of the most important legacies of postmodernism in the field of literary studies is that generic purity is fundamentally unattainable and that all the attempts at creating critical pigeonholes and erecting barriers between genres, forms, and modes of writing eventually turn out to be problematic at best and counter-productive at worst. Jacques Derrida famously contends that it is ‘impossible not to mix genres’ because ‘lodged within the heart of the law [of genre]’ is a counter-law ‘of impurity or principle of contamination’.<sup>20</sup> According to Alastair Fowler, ‘genres have not clear dividing boundaries’ and ‘membership of one by no means rules out membership of others’.<sup>21</sup> By helping to overcome the distinction between genres, postmodernism has contributed to removing any difference between elitist and popular cultural products, paving the way for an explosion of scholarly informed studies on crime, detective, sensational, Gothic, and supernatural fictions.

It may surprise, then, that when it comes to the serious and academic examination of popular genres and forms, it seems that even the most basic assumptions of postmodernism, including the death of the author and the instability

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’, trans. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980), 55-81 (p. 57).

<sup>21</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 38, 37.

of all generic categories, have failed to significantly affect critical studies in Italian language. After all, the stubborn resistance to the intellectual scrutiny of popular fiction has characterised Italian literary criticism for decades.<sup>22</sup> Both the nineteenth-century *romanzo d'appendice*, the Italian equivalent of the French *feuilleton*, in which many of the patterns and tropes of modern crime writing were first articulated, and the *giallo*, a term that generally defines the twentieth-century developments of crime, mystery, and detective writings, have been for a long time discarded as aesthetically worthless and hence confined to the territory of the para-literature.<sup>23</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, a group of scholars that include Angela Bianchini, Giuseppe Zaccaria, Umberto Eco, and Giuseppe Petronio, whose

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<sup>22</sup> In Italy, as we shall see particularly in chapter one, the label popular fiction still retains negative connotations: trivial, escapist, and often unworthy of literary analysis. In this work, I use the label 'popular' as defined by Nicolas J. Perella, that is the type of fiction that was 'created, primarily at least, for and by Italian bourgeois, not for and by peasants and the proletariat', in the era of mass literature. Nicolas J. Perella, 'Popular Fiction Between Italian Unification and World War I', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel*, ed. by Peter Bondanella and Andrea Ciccarelli, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 75-88 (p. 75).

<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that both forms have unanimously acquired literary dignity. Most scholars still include both in the realm of para-literature. See, for example, Laura Ricci, *Paraletteratura. Lingua e stile dei generi di consumo* (Rome: Carocci, 2013), pp. 71-89. Formally, the *romanzo d'appendice* is a complex hybridisation of different modes of writing, including the French *feuilleton* (sensationalism and melodrama, clear-cut line between good and evil, contemporary settings), and the eighteenth-century British Gothic novel (castles and monasteries, motifs of purity versus contamination, the persecution of innocent heroines, the glorification of vice, occasional supernatural strands). Like the *feuilleton*, the label *romanzo d'appendice* is generally meant to describe both a publishing process and a fictional genre. It refers to the market-induced fragmentation a novel underwent when published either in the *feuilleton* section of a newspaper or in serial form. It is also associated with melodramatic and sensational writing and with a popular and mostly feminine readership. Unfortunately, a variety of very different texts, both ideologically and aesthetically, have been included in this category. Most of the texts were heavily influenced by melodrama and some were published in serial form, but other literary forms and cultural discourses found their way into these texts, and a readership larger than the feminine and the popular constituted its social audience. This is why, despite the increase in the number of studies dedicated to this type of text, scholars are still struggling with the term. In Italy, many mainstream writers such as Gabriele D'Annunzio and Giovanni Verga published their novels in instalments in journals and newspapers, but the often negatively connoted label of *appendicisti* is generally attributed to a restricted group of popular novelists that include Francesco Mastriani, Giulio Piccini, Carolina Invernizio, Luciano Zuccoli, Ugo Mioni, and Emilio Salgari.



interests ranged from mass communication to the sociology of literature, turned to a more rigorous consideration of popular genres.<sup>24</sup> Popular texts, however, were analysed, prevalently through Marxist readings, exclusively as sociological artefacts and reduced to an ideological function.

According to Eco, who follows closely the assumptions of thinker and historian Antonio Gramsci, the *romanzo d'appendice* performed an important cultural work in the nineteenth and twentieth century by allowing readers to satisfy private desires and anxieties while participating in collective narrative fantasies: the popular novel is, for Eco, 'una macchina gratificatoria'.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, for most scholars, the *giallo* merely provides a form of catharsis for its readers: it is designed to raise emotions, fears, and anxieties only to assuage them through textual resolution and the triumph of the good over the forces of evil. For Petronio, it is the

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<sup>24</sup> In his witty critique of the snobbishness of Italian literary criticism, Petronio argues that the term 'popular' has no connotative meanings and is not indicative of the quality of novels: 'che un romanzo sia poliziesco non dice niente del suo valore (intellettuale, morale, ideologico, estetico), come non dice niente, per la valutazione assiologica di un libro, che si tratti di un romanzo storico, psicologico'. Giuseppe Petronio, 'Introduzione', in Id., *Letteratura di massa, letteratura di consumo: guida storica e critica* (Bari: Laterza, 1979), pp. IX-LXXXVI (p. XXXVI). See also Angela Bianchini, *Il romanzo d'appendice* (Turin: ERI, 1969); Id., *La luce a gas e il feuilleton: due invenzioni dell'Ottocento* (Naples: Liguori, 1988); Umberto Eco, *Il superuomo di massa: studi sul romanzo popolare* (Milan: Cooperativa scrittori, 1976); Giuseppe Zaccaria, *Il romanzo d'appendice: aspetti della 'narrativa popolare' dei secoli 19 e 20* (Turin: Paravia, 1977); Massimo Romano, *Mitologia romantica e letteratura popolare: struttura e sociologia del romanzo d'appendice* (Ravenna: Longo, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> Eco, *Il superuomo di massa*, p. 20. Gramsci famously writes that 'il romanzo d'appendice sostituisce (e favorisce nel tempo stesso) il fantasticare dell'uomo del popolo, è un vero sognatore a occhi aperti. Si può vedere ciò che sostengono Freud e gli psicanalisti sul sognare ad occhi aperti. In questo caso si può dire che nel popolo il fantasticare è dipendente dal complesso di inferiorità (sociale) che determina lunghe fantasticherie sull'idea di vendetta, di punizione dei colpevoli dei mali sopportati'. Antonio Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1950), p. 108. Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian writer, politician, political theorist and linguist. He was a founding member and leader of the Communist party of Italy and one of the most important Marxist thinkers in the twentieth century. His writings are heavily concerned with the analysis of culture and political leadership. He is renowned for his concept of cultural hegemony as a means of maintaining the state in a capitalist society.

need of security of the bourgeois readership, to which it is offered ‘la rassicurazione finale sulla forza vittoriosa del bene’ that originally gave rise to the *giallo* in the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> This genre, Petronio claims, is ‘un racconto consolatorio’ which contrasted with ‘la deprimente “letteratura della crisi”’.<sup>27</sup>

Formally, however, the main structural characteristics of the nineteenth-century popular novel – archetypal characters, improbable events, hackneyed subplots, melodrama, sensationalism, and horror at the expense of literary grace – are seen as incompatible with the form of the *giallo*. Giuliana Pieri correctly suggests that nowadays *giallo* is ‘a short-hand term for any type of detective fiction and more widely any story that has a mystery element’.<sup>28</sup> The obvious implication of this statement is that, in the recognition and the categorisation of the *giallo*, the element of crime is significantly marginalised at the expense of detection, which stands out as instrumental. For Loris Rambelli, whose seminal *Storia del giallo italiano* (1979) constitutes the first systematic recognition of an Italian history of the crime novel, ‘nella struttura del giallo tutto è sottomesso alla detection’.<sup>29</sup> Thus in critical literature, nineteenth and twentieth-century incarnations of crime writing have taken divergent paths. For Guido Bezzola and Rambelli, the lack of detective figures and a solid investigative paradigm within the nineteenth-century popular novel render the *giallo* and the *romanzo d’appendice* fundamentally incompatible.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Giuseppe Petronio, *Il punto su: il romanzo poliziesco* (Rome: Laterza, 1985), p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>28</sup> Giuliana Pieri, ‘Introduction’, in *Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. by Giuliana Pieri (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 1-6 (p. 1).

<sup>29</sup> Loris Rambelli, *Storia del giallo italiano* (Milan: Garzanti, 1979), p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Dal punto di vista tecnico, gli intrecci del *feuilleton* possono entrare nel giallo, caso mai, solo come antefatti e quanto più sono macchinosi, tanto più vanno a detrimento dell’inventiva poliziesca che è apprezzabile quando è semplice e sobria nelle sue trovate e percorribile nelle sue linee geometriche’. Rambelli, *Storia del giallo italiano*, p. 123. See also Guido Bezzola, ‘Preistoria e storia del giallo all’italiana’, in *Pubblico*, ed. by Vittorio

Stefano Tani sharply concludes that in the second half of the nineteenth century the *giallo* in Italy ‘was practically nonexistent’. For Tani, this ‘has long been an imported genre’, which officially entered Italian culture only ‘in 1929 when the Mondadori publishing house began printing translations of British and American [...] detective fiction in a special collection called “I libri gialli”’.<sup>31</sup>

As well-known, from 1980s, drawing on Marxist and Foucauldian readings, numerous Anglo-American scholars such as Stephen Knight have reassessed the traditional account of the genre as rooted in a series of canonical texts pivoting on detective figures – in particular Edgar Allan Poe’s August Dupin and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes – in order to revise the extent of the canon within the larger territory of crime fiction.<sup>32</sup> In Italy, instead, the idea of the *giallo* as a popular genre defined by fixed sets of rules and conventions has rarely been challenged, with the effect of leaving the form entrapped within the narrower territory of the detective story. This is perhaps why the term *giallo* has been increasingly perceived as outmoded and inadequate in critical literature and progressively replaced with the label *noir*. Notably the work of post-World War II authors venturing into the territory of crime writing have been labelled as *noir* in order to indicate a sort of

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Spinazzola (Milan: il Saggiatore, 1977), pp. 103-25 (p. 105); Loris Rambelli, ‘Il presunto giallo italiano: dalla preistoria alla storia’, *Problemi*, 86 (1989), 233-56.

<sup>31</sup> Stefano Tani, ‘The Doomed Detective. The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction’, in *Two Centuries of Detective Fiction. A New Comparative Approach*, ed. by Maurizio Ascari (Bologna: University of Bologna Press, 2000), pp. 181-212 (p. 198).

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Knight aims to establish ‘the nature and ideology of crime fiction without detectives’. Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 8. In a more recent book, he states that ‘there are plenty of novels without a detective [...] and nearly as many without even a mystery [...] There is, though, always a crime (or very occasionally just the appearance of one) and that is why I have used the generally descriptive term “crime fiction” for the whole genre’. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Death, Detection, Diversity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. XII.

transition from a genre centred on enigma to one more focused on social context.<sup>33</sup>

Today the *noir* has monopolised literary studies on Italian crime fiction. Most critical works that have appeared over the past thirty years, when the renaissance of a home-grown production of crime stories has made the subject unavoidable, have a restricted focus that oscillates between the 1960s and the present day.<sup>34</sup>

Lately, there has also been an increase in critical works written in English language, which through new approaches have revitalised the scholarship and broadened the interest in the genre beyond Italian national borders.<sup>35</sup> All of them, however, are concerned with the contemporary scene, with some exceptional exploration of the 1930s. Most of these studies prevalently apply the notion of postmodern *impegno*, which according to Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian

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<sup>33</sup> See Fabio Giovannini, *Storia del noir* (Rome: Donzelli, 2000); *Roma noir 2005. Tendenze di un nuovo genere metropolitano*, ed. by Elisabetta Mondello (Rome: Robin edizioni, 2005); *Roma noir 2007. Luoghi e non luoghi nel romanzo nero contemporaneo*, ed. by Elisabetta Mondello (Rome: Robin edizioni, 2007); *Arcobaleno noir: genesi, diaspora e nuove cittadinanze del noir tra cinema e letteratura*, ed. by Alessandra Calanchi (Giulianova: Galaad edizioni, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Gisella Padovani, *L'officina del mistero: nuove frontiere della narrativa poliziesca italiana* (Enna: Papiro, 1989); *Le figure del delitto. Il romanzo poliziesco in Italia dalle origini a oggi*, ed. by Renzo Cremante (Casalecchio di Reno: Grafis, 1989); Massimo Carloni, *L'Italia in Giallo: Geografia e storia del giallo italiano contemporaneo* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 1994); Giuseppe Petronio, *Sulle tracce del giallo* (Rome: Gamberetti, 2000); Raffaele Crovi, *Le maschere del mistero: storie e tecniche di thriller italiani e stranieri* (Florence: Passigli, 2000); Luca Crovi, *Tutti i colori del giallo: il giallo italiano da De Marchi a Scerbanenco a Camilleri* (Venice: Marsilio, 2002); *Il giallo italiano come nuovo romanzo sociale*, ed. by Marco Sangiorgi and Luca Telò (Ravenna: Longo, 2004); Maurizio Pistelli, *Un secolo in giallo: storia del poliziesco italiano 1860-1960* (Rome: Donzelli, 2006); *Il romanzo poliziesco, la storia, la memoria. Italia*, ed. by Claudio Milanesi (Bologna: Astræa, 2009); Elvio Guagnini, *Dal giallo al noir e oltre: declinazioni del poliziesco italiano* (Formia: Ghenomena, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> *Differences, Deceits and Desires. Murder and Mayhem in Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. by Mirna Cicioni and Nicoletta di Ciolla (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008); *Uncertain Justice: Crimes and Retribution in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. by Nicoletta Di Ciolla (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010); *Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. by Giuliana Pieri (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011); Elena Past, *Methods of Murder: Beccarian Introspection and Lombrosian Vivisection in Italian Crime Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Barbara Pezzotti, *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction. An Historical Overview* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014); Marco Paoli, *Giorgio Scerbanenco: Urban Space, Violence and Gender Identity in Post-War Italian Crime Fiction* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2016).

Mussnug constitutes an alternative variant of commitment, ‘an ethical or political position channelled through specific cultural and artistic activities, against any restrictive ideological brace’, exclusively to a group of post-war *noir* writers, including Leonardo Sciascia, Giorgio Scerbanenco, Carlo Lucarelli, Andrea Camilleri, and Giancarlo De Cataldo.<sup>36</sup> The increasing utilisation of postmodern *impegno* as theoretical model has led to the progressive detachment of these authors’ work from the domain of popular literature in which it was previously situated – except for Sciascia, who has always been endowed with a canonical status.<sup>37</sup> Gianluigi Simonetti in *La letteratura circostante: narrativa e poesia nell’Italia contemporanea* (2018) sums up and states that the contemporary Italian *noir* ‘si impone [...] a livello critico perché tiene viva quell’ipoteca realista ed eticamente responsabile che la letteratura popolare tradizionalmente elude’.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussnug, ‘Introduction’, in *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussnug (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 1-32 (p. 11). For an overview of the relationship between crime fiction and *impegno* see Giuliana Pieri, ‘Letteratura gialla e noir degli anni Novanta e impegno’, in *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, pp. 289-304.

<sup>37</sup> In this respect, an often-cited study is Pezzotti’s *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction*, whose aim, as the author states, is to see if authors such as Lorian Machiavelli, Leonardo Sciascia, Giorgio Scerbanenco and others ‘could be considered committed writers, in spite of not corresponding to the ideal portrait of the “organic” writer of the Italian literary tradition’. Pezzotti, *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction*, p. 183. Amongst other contributions see Pia Schwarz Lausten, ‘Un virus nel corpo sano della letteratura? Il nuovo *noir* italiano e l’impegno’, in *Noir de noir. Un’indagine pluridisciplinare*, ed. by Monica Jansen, Dieter Vermandere, and Inge Lanslots (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 57-71; Mark Chu, ‘Impegno da vendere: società e politica nella serie del Commissario Montalbano’, in *Specchi di realtà: aspetti del rapporto tra narrativa e società in Italia dopo il 1989*, ed. by Roberto Bertoni (Turin and Dublin: TCD-Trauden, 2011), pp. 67-80; Enrichetta Lucilla Frezzato, ‘From a Local to a Global Perspective in Crime Writing: on Massimo Carlotto, *Impegno*, and Respiro Corto’, *Quaderni d’Italianistica* 37.1 (2016), 107-24. A more challenging perspective can be found in Elena Past, ‘Lucarelli’s *Guernica*: The Predicament of Postmodern Impegno’, *Italica*, 84.2/3 (2007), 290-308.

<sup>38</sup> Gianluigi Simonetti, *La letteratura circostante: narrativa e poesia nell’Italia contemporanea* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2018), p. 406.

Contemporary authors have further bolstered such difference from previous practitioners. De Cataldo, in a recent interview, explains how and why *giallo* and *noir* are fundamentally opposite: ‘il noir si fonda sulle emozioni, mentre il giallo sulla razionalità della trama [...] Il giallo è una scrittura di ordine [...] [il] noir è una scrittura di caos’.<sup>39</sup> Unlike in the *gialli*, for Carlo Lucarelli, in the *noirs* ‘non esiste una giustizia vera’ and it must be found ‘in questa fascia di ambiguità [...] l’indagine del *noir* rispetto al giallo’.<sup>40</sup> The noir raises thrills and emotions, and possesses a subversive potential that lacks in the *giallo*, which is instead merely popular, conservative, reassuring, and essentially incapable of stimulating forces other than mere narrative revelation.<sup>41</sup> However, it is not simple to determine with certitude whether these statements are the product of superficial readings of what Italian writers regard as *gialli*, namely classical detective stories – the ambiguity of justice, needless to say, is central in paradigmatic examples such as Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and *And Then There Were None* (1939) – or if they are the result of the writers’ deliberate attempt to ennoble their work and distinguish it from that of authors who are still considered as unworthy of careful literary analysis. Irrespectively, the study of Italian crime fiction exclusively through the prism of the writers’ socio-political engagement has had the side effect of marginalising an enormous number of writers. While the label *romanzo d’appendice* has over time become a sort of steamroller that removes all aesthetic differentiation amongst the texts that have had the misfortune to fall into this

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<sup>39</sup> See *Dietro le quinte del noir: gli addetti ai lavori si raccontano*, ed. by Alessandra Calanchi (Fano: Aras, 2014), pp. 21-6 (p. 21).

<sup>40</sup> Carlo Lucarelli, ‘Il giallo storico ambientato durante il fascismo’, in *Il giallo italiano come nuovo romanzo sociale*, pp. 153-8 (p. 154).

<sup>41</sup> In the study *Il romanzo di consumo. Editoria e letteratura di massa* (Naples: Liguori, 1993) Carlo Bordini still regards the work of novelists such as Agatha Christie as para-literature. Bordini, *Il romanzo di consumo*, p. 79.

category, the scope of the *giallo* has been significantly restricted so as to represent, through a process of elimination, the work of authors that critics have arbitrarily and superficially discarded as disengaged, merely escapist, formulaic, conservative, and thus uninteresting.

Nineteenth-century Italian crime fiction, ultimately, seems to be non-existent. There are, however, a few exceptions. The first that deserves to be mentioned is Maurizio Pistelli's *Un secolo in giallo: storia del poliziesco italiano 1860-1960* (2006), which includes a long chapter that maps the rich variety of embryonic sub-genres, from the city-mysteries to the judicial novel and the avenger-detective form, constituting nineteenth-century crime fiction. Pistelli's study is paradigmatic of much Italian literary criticism on the *giallo*: with very few exceptions, essays on Italian crime writing take the form of historical surveys, which progress from the supposed origins of the genre – almost exclusively in 1929 – and move through major locations and periods. Yet histories traditionally work by concealing and through repeated conventionalisation, inevitably thus bring serious misrepresentation of the complexity of the form's development. Furthermore, historical studies tend to address popular genres as shaped by rigid conventions rather than hybrid and mobile sites crossing boundaries, and offer a wide coverage without providing any close-reading of the texts, which are rarely allowed to speak for themselves. A very recent book is *La scienza, la morte, gli spiriti: le origini del romanzo noir fra Otto e Novecento* (2019), in which Andrea De Luca offers a brief, generic reconstruction of the cultural climate in which manifestations of crime writing emerged, too brief, alas, to problematise and examine in depth diverse

elements such as criminology, spiritualism, and the influence of foreign models.<sup>42</sup> Another contribution that has just appeared is Francesca Facchi's methodological article 'Per una metodologia del protogiallo italiano: problemi e risposte' (2019). She correctly draws attention to the role of British and French authors in the sedimentation and circulation of crime elements in Italian literature of the nineteenth century, but eventually she further reinforces the assumption of Italian crime fiction as a fundamentally imported genre.<sup>43</sup>

Within this heterogeneous critical territory, we can single out specific patterns that help to define the state of literature on crime fiction in Italy to date. For one thing, Italian critics have restricted their focus to a small number of contemporary *noir* writers that have been rescued from the swampy and ignominious territory of popular fiction and directly transferred to the heavenly locales of mainstream, respectable literature. As a consequence, nineteenth-century Italian crime fiction has been pushed into the background and its manifestations curtailed to some cursory practitioner.

The second aspect is directly related to this last point. There are very few studies devoted to the *romanzo d'appendice* and almost all of them tend to reduce its interest to an ideological function, thus failing to explain why literary forms are so often appropriated for purposes other than hegemonic ones. More recent works such as those of Pistelli and De Luca, instead overstate the influence of foreign models. Although the role that British and French literature played in forging crime writing in Italy should not be minimised, the critical prejudice of the imported genre as often repeated by scholars simply does not stand up to a close critical scrutiny:

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<sup>42</sup> Andrea De Luca, *La scienza, la morte, gli spiriti: Le origini del romanzo noir fra Otto e Novecento* (Venice: Marsilio, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Francesca Facchi, 'Per una metodologia del protogiallo italiano: problemi e risposte', *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies*, 54 (2019), pp. 1-21.



it does neither account for its uniqueness and its relation to specific historical and geopolitical anxieties, nor explain the multitude of divergent and often conflicting political roles that crime fiction plays.

Thirdly, there is the tendency of Italian scholars to investigate crime fiction in abstraction, as a separate and coherent category often unrelated to its socio-historical context. This has had the detrimental effect of obliterating the multifarious nature of the form and its textual mobility, concealing how and why it has developed over time dialectically through interactions with other kinds of writing, including the Gothic, the sensation novel, and the ghost-story.

Crucially, the interaction between Anglo-American crime fiction and the Gothic, as well as the interplay between Gothicism and science, have been at the centre of many critical inquiries.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, Italian critics have not simply failed to engage with the intersections between these two forms, but they have long struggled to even acknowledge the very existence of the Gothic mode in Italian literature. Monica Farnetti, for instance, has identified ‘la natura sostanzialmente parodica e citazionale – quando non meramente esornativa – del gotico italiano’, which essentially failed to make an impact in the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup> The term

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<sup>44</sup> The interaction between crime and Gothic fiction is addressed in Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter History of Crime Fiction. Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). See also Catherine Spooner, ‘Crime and the Gothic’, in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Sian MacArthur, *Crime and the Gothic. Identifying the Gothic Footprint in Modern Crime Fiction* (Faringdon: Libri, 2011). As to the relationship between science and the Gothic in the nineteenth century see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder c. 1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Hurley, *The Gothic Body*; Stephan Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin-De-Siècle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Hilary Grimes, *The Late Victorian Gothic: Mental Science, the Uncanny, and Scenes of Writing* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Monica Farnetti, ‘Patologie del romanticismo. Il gotico e il fantastico fra Italia ed Europa’, in *Mappe della letteratura europea e mediterranea. Dal Barocco all'Ottocento*, ed. by Gian Mario Anselmi, 4 vols (Milan: Bruno Mondadori Editore, 2000-01), II (2000), pp. 340-66 (p. 360).

*gotico* is rarely found in Italian literary criticism and often utilised in its restrictive, eighteenth-century sense. More importantly, from 1977 onwards, when the seminal volume by Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970) was translated into Italian, it has been often used as a synonym of *fantastico* to define an increasingly homogenous group of literary texts.<sup>46</sup> In the 1980s, the work of writers and scholars such as Italo Calvino, Enrico Ghidetti, and Gianfranco Contini contributed to constructing the canon of the *fantastico* by considerably denying its irrational, hybrid, and popular character in order to emphasise its rational, purely intellectual and markedly elitist nature.<sup>47</sup> Calvino dismisses the fantastic in the nineteenth century as a 'campo veramente "minore"', characterised by the 'controllo della ragione sull'ispirazione istintiva o inconscia' and 'disciplina stilistica'.<sup>48</sup> Enrico Ghidetti and Leonardo Lattarulo have equally denied the existence of Gothic fictions during the nineteenth century, arguing that the 'rare esplorazioni lungo le rive del fangoso torrente dell'occultismo, che attraversa impetuosamente la cultura europea, saranno tentate solo più tardi dai decadenti

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<sup>46</sup> For Todorov, the fantastic is a threshold genre that relies heavily on tension between the real and the imaginary. The fantastic is created in between these two notions, when a story introduces an event that appears beyond the natural laws of our world without providing a conclusive explanation. If the event were to be satisfactorily explained, the narrative would stop being fantastic and fall into one of two closely related genres: the uncanny or the marvelous. He thus defines the fantastic as 'a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion'. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* [1970] trans. by Richard Howard (London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> See Italo Calvino, 'Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento' [1983], in Id., *Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 198-211; *Notturmo Italiano. Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento*, ed. by Enrico Ghidetti (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1984); *Italia magica: racconti surreali novecenteschi*, ed. by Gianfranco Contini (Turin: Einaudi, 1988). Remo Ceserani, in his influential study *Il fantastico* (1996), has even deliberately refused to discuss popular fiction, which would apparently contaminate the supposedly pure identity of the form. Remo Ceserani, *Il fantastico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Calvino, 'Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento', p. 210; Italo Calvino, 'Il fantastico nella letteratura italiana', in Id., *Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 219-30 (p. 224).

dell'inizio del secolo'.<sup>49</sup> Giuseppe Lo Castro has pointed out that 'la maggior parte degli scrittori italiani che hanno subito il fascino del fantastico si confrontano comunque con una istanza irriducibilmente logico-razionale, che tende a confinare il potenziale perturbante in ambienti ristretti e in situazioni-limite'.<sup>50</sup> The Gothic/fantastic, then, seems to be inherently alien to Italian sensibility.

Although in many studies the Gothic and the fantastic are almost used interchangeably, for Remo Ceserani there is a substantial difference that resides in their very essence. The Gothic is a genre that 'constructed its tradition for the most part using the model of the romance (and, if necessary, combining it with elements of the fable or fairy tale, of the extraordinary and the horrific)'. The fantastic, instead, is a 'new, unmistakably modern literary mode which is also found in texts belonging to different genres, even those characterized by the clearest mimetic realism'.<sup>51</sup> Not only does Ceserani privilege the fantastic over the Gothic, but he also uses the terminology Gothic in its restrictive sense, dismissing its manifestations in the Italian context. The nature of these statements is equivocal and ostensibly contrasts with the way in which the Gothic mode has been theorised and studied since the 1990s in Anglo-American scholarship. Nonetheless, these theoretical approaches have formed, as Stefano Lazzarin claims, an 'amalgama di

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<sup>49</sup> Enrico Ghidetti, 'Prefazione', in Id., *Notturmo italiano*, pp. VII-XII (p. XII).

<sup>50</sup> Giuseppe Lo Castro, 'Introduzione', *La tentazione del fantastico: racconti italiani da Gualdo a Svevo*, ed. by Antonio D'Elia et. al. (Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2007), pp. 5-18 (p. 8).

<sup>51</sup> Remo Ceserani, 'The Boundaries of the Fantastic', in *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic: Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions*, ed. by Francesca Billiani and Gigliola Sulis (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), pp. 37-45 (p. 41). In this book, the Gothic is prevalently used in its narrower sense of female Gothic, which 'challenges (whether in a reassuring or disquieting fashion) representations of femininity and masculinity against the rules of a patriarchal society'. Francesca Billiani, 'The Italian Gothic and Fantastic: An Inquiry into the Notions of Literary and Cultural Traditions (1869-1997)', in *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic*, pp. 15-31 (p. 23).

abbagliante prestigio' that continues to be largely undisputed in Italian literary criticism.<sup>52</sup>

My thesis challenges and seeks to disrupt several of these existing critical narratives and to suggest new answers to many questions grappled with by scholars. The critical framework of the project is rooted in a series of key texts that will be discussed in the next paragraph, in which I also outline my methodology and describe the general structure of the thesis.

### Approach and Structure

Over the past few years, Anglo-American crime studies have developed considerably and started to pursue a variety of different paths. The impact of feminism and cultural, queer, and postcolonial studies have contributed enormously to the broadening of the scholarship. Critics have gradually replaced the previously widely used label detective fiction with the umbrella term crime fiction, progressively deconstructing the canon of the genre as rooted in a series of canonical works in order to probe its composite nature.<sup>53</sup> Amongst the many remarkable studies, the one that mostly influenced my critical approach is Maurizio Ascari's *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction. Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (2007), which explores the centuries-long transition from crime to detective fiction,

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<sup>52</sup> Stefano Lazzarin, 'Trentacinque anni di teoria e critica del fantastico italiano (dal 1980 a oggi)', *Il fantastico italiano. Bilancio critico e bibliografia commentata (dal 1980 a oggi)*, ed. by Stefano Lazzarin et al. (Florence: Le Monnier, 2016), pp. 1-58 (p. 31).

<sup>53</sup> See, amongst others, Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*; Martin Kayman, *From Bow Street to Baker Street: Mystery, Detection and Narrative* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1992); Pablo Mukherjee, *Crime and Empire: The Colony in Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2005); Ascari, *A Counter History of Crime Fiction*; *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, ed. by Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D'Haen (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

which originated in the nineteenth century, highlighting the interaction between realism and fantasy in the development of the genre. This book, which maps those hybrid zones where crime fiction conventions mingle with those of sensation fiction, the Gothic, and the ghost story, or else are conflated with the discourses of sciences and pseudo-sciences, constitutes a fundamental starting point for the analysis of crime writing as a flexible, fluid literary form whose conventional boundaries must be continuously discussed and renegotiated.

In Italy, the researches on early twentieth-century popular fiction of Fabrizio Foni and the studies devoted to the exploration of the occult in the 1960s of Fabio Camilletti have been equally pivotal in my project.<sup>54</sup> In some ways, the reluctance of scholars to explore of nineteenth-century Italian crime and Gothic fiction is understandable given the complicated and often tormented emergence of popular literature in these years: after all, the French novel and the French language were long dominant in Italian culture, with most Italian authors of the time struggling to achieve a mastery of Italian that equalled the ease with which they had mastered French and their own dialect.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, Foni has convincingly demonstrated that forms of popular literature existed throughout the nineteenth century and

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<sup>54</sup> See Fabrizio Foni, *Alla fiera dei mostri: racconti pulp, orrori e arcane fantasticherie nelle riviste italiane 1899-1932* (Latina: Tunué, 2007); *Piccoli mostri crescono. Nero, fantastico e bizzarrie varie nella prima annata de 'La domenica del Corriere' (1899)* (Bologna: Perdita, 2010). Fabio Camilletti, *Italia lunare. Gli anni Sessanta e l'occulto* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018); 'Guerre, sequestri e tavolette ouija. Contributo a una storia parapsicologica del Novecento italiano', *The Italianist*, 39.1 (2019), 1-14.

<sup>55</sup> See Manlio Graziano, *The Failure of Italian Nationhood: The Geopolitics of a Troubled Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p. 66. In some ways, of course, it is true that the French novel saturated the Italian literary market and determined the habits and expectations of readers. As Donald Sassoon argues, although there were Italian *feuilletons*, and there were journals carrying serialised novels, what they mostly published was 'French authors who had emerged victorious from keen competition, leaving behind them a large number of forgotten novels and failed authors'. Donald Sassoon, *The Culture of the Europeans: From 1800 to the Present* (London: Harper Press, 2006), p. 486.

intensified towards the *fin-de-siècle*. More importantly, he has discovered a huge variety of forgotten popular texts situated at the intersection between crime, Gothic, and the supernatural that appeared in obscure newspapers and journals approximately between 1899 and 1919, some of which have become part of my body of work. Camilletti has been one of the first to denounce the inadequacy of traditional Italian theorisations of the Gothic/fantastic as a form exclusively “alto”, intellettualistico e razionale’, which have marginalised the ‘contaminazione con altri codici e la cultura “popolare”, il manieristico e l’irrazionale’.<sup>56</sup> In so doing, scholars have lost sight of the complexity of hybrid literary phenomena that always combine high and low culture. Moreover, Camilletti argues that the very limited critical recognition of the Gothic in nineteenth-century Italy is justifiable from a historical point of view. According to him, in the early decades of the century, Italy’s strong rejection of the literary paradigms of Northern Europe – ‘fin dall’inizio della Restaurazione, qualsiasi influenza “nordica” sulla cultura italiana dovette fronteggiare un ostracismo che non ha equivalenti nel resto dei paesi europei’ – has had amongst its consequences the autonomous and different articulation of Gothic tropes and themes in the second part of the century.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, such material has been perceived as unorthodox by scholars and inevitably pushed aside. However, as Stephen King reminds us, periods of crisis and serious socio-economic and political strain are extremely fertile for the

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<sup>56</sup> Camilletti, *Italia lunare*, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Camilletti speaks of ‘un’opposizione radicale e inappellabile, che [...] mescola considerazioni climatico-antropologiche a un rifiuto netto a incrinare i presupposti dell’estetica classica, e delinea un ripudio dell’“orrore” che infine [...] viene condiviso dalla stessa scena romantica’. Fabio Camilletti, “‘Timore’ e “terrore” nella polemica classico-romantica: l’Italia e il ripudio del gotico’, *Italian Studies*, 69.2 (2014), 31-45 (p. 244).

development and spread of horror literature, and in these years, as we shall see, the Gothic takes on different connotations and permeates numerous unexpected texts.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, I have found extremely useful the rich historiography on Lombroso, which has exploded over the last twenty years, testifying how his work and legacy continue to be the object of scholarly development and debate.<sup>59</sup> Within this variegated scholarship, a brilliant work is *Nemico della società. La figura del*

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<sup>58</sup> Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* [1981] (London: Hodder, 2012), p. 43. It must be underlined that, by the mid-nineteenth century, thanks to several channels of communication that were by then open, Italian writers were well aware of the Gothic mode, its fascination and popular appeal. Particularly in Milan and Naples, from the 1820s onwards, the works of classic Gothic writers such as Ann Radcliffe and Matthew G. Lewis began to be translated into Italian. See Ann Radcliffe, *L'eremita della tomba misteriosa* [no translator indicated] (Naples: Raffaello, 1825); Elena e Vivaldi, trans. by Mr De Coureil (Naples: G. Nobile, 1826); *La foresta perigliosa, o L'abbazia di Santa Chiara* [no translator indicated] (Milan: Ferrario, after 1830); Matthew G. Lewis, *Il frate* [no translator indicated] (Milan: Ferrario, 1850). Another channel by which Italian writers could familiarise themselves with Gothic narrative was through their reading in languages other than Italian. The English classics had been translated into French close to their appearance in English, and most Italian intellectuals spoke French as their first language, and other writers had language and literary skills that stretched well beyond French. It thus comes as no surprise that since the late 1820s Italian writers started to incorporate Gothic tropes – persecuted women and vicious villains, lost children, disguises, problems of identity – in numerous principally historical novels, including Giambattista Bazzoni's *Il castello di Trezzo* (Milan: Pirotta, 1827), Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi's *La battaglia di Benevento* (Livorno: Berani, Antonelli e c., 1827), and Antonio Ranieri's *Ginevra o l'orfana della nunziata*, 2 vols (Capolago: Tipografia elvetica, 1839). In the second half of the century, the Gothic has been principally, if not exclusively, identified as typifying the work of adherents of the movement of the *scapigliatura* such as Emilio Praga, Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, Arrigo and Camillo Boito. As David Del Principe observes, *scapigliati* 'lived in perpetual conflict with a prospering bourgeoisie, to whom they attributed an unmodulated thirst for Industrialization and Progress', and responded to decaying *Risorgimento* ideals with anarchy, protesting against Catholicism, capitalism, and militarism. David Del Principe, *Rebellion, Death, and Aesthetics in Italy. The Demons of Scapigliatura* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> For decades, intellectual historians thought that the decline of Lombroso's positivist school had occurred by the time of his death in 1909 under the attacks of neo-idealist philosophy. However, as scholars have shown, Lombroso's legacy survived much further into the twentieth century and influenced the fascist regime's police. See Jonathan Dunnage, 'The Legacy of Cesare Lombroso and Criminal Anthropology in the Post-War Italian Police: A Study of the Culture, Narrative and Memory of a Post-Fascist Institution', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 22.3 (2017), 365-84. For most commentators, moreover, his work uncannily anticipated the current genetic and neurological explanations of crime. See in particular Gibson, *Born to Crime*; Nicole Rafter, *The Criminal Brain. Understanding Biological Theories of Crime* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), p. 85; Emilia Musumeci, 'New Natural Born Killers? The Legacy of Lombroso in Neuroscience and Law', in *The Cesare Lombroso Handbook*, pp. 131-46.

*delinquente nella cultura letteraria e scientifica dell'Italia postunitaria* (2015), in which Alessio Berrè, following in the footsteps of the French historian Dominique Kalifa, analyses the major role that the literary sphere has played in the shaping of the figure of the criminal as social enemy in post-unification Italy. Berrè has had in particular the merit of uncovering the significant influence of criminologists and sociologists in the reception of crime literature, as well as showing how canonical nineteenth-century authors too – he focuses on Carlo Dossi and Edoardo Scarfoglio – made a massive use of crime and detective elements in their texts.<sup>60</sup>

My thesis builds upon and develops such important readings in order to provide a fuller and more nuanced picture of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian culture and literature. The aim of this thesis is twofold. The first, quite straightforward, is the intention of re-writing the history and development of Italian crime fiction. By unearthing obscured texts that have been excluded from scholarly consideration as well as revitalising mainstream and popular works through new interpretations, I challenge traditional accounts of the evolution of nineteenth-century crime fiction as unproblematic and conservative, with the aim to reveal this literature as an aesthetically and ideologically varied and even confrontational body of work, characterised by formal complexity and thematic ambiguity. I will bring out the richness and importance of these texts not merely as historical or sociological documents but rather as literary texts that address, challenge, subvert, and manipulate the dominant values and prejudices of a cultural moment that is not so much distant from our own. I do not, however, intend to indicate the precise inception of Italian crime fiction. In this respect, I take issue

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<sup>60</sup> Alessio Berrè, *Nemico della società. La figura del delinquente nella cultura letteraria e scientifica dell'Italia postunitaria* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2015).



with the very idea of crime fiction as a static genre adhering closely to established conventions, which resists original analysis and obfuscates its textual complexity. The focus will thus be on three key aspects of crime literature – contamination, transgression, and mobility – which clearly emerge especially in the years in which this form was not yet recognisable by the public, and no critical term had been coined to define it. I will, however, utilise the term genre when referring to its later canonisation and the status it has acquired in critical literature.

Secondly, I aim to provide new insights into the relationship between science and literature, by intervening in the ongoing debates concerning the ambiguity of positivist criminologists' work and legacy. I argue that it is in the collision of disciplines that new formations of knowledge can arise. Crime fiction, as a form that has been increasingly defined as hybrid, should then be investigated through interdisciplinary approaches that challenge constraining boundaries. Accordingly, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach, framing readings of literary works with the study of contemporaneous developments in criminology, in order to uncover whether and how a literary text has been affected by these new scientific understandings or, indeed, whether and how the text has modified its original meanings through the utilisation of that discourse for fictional purposes. By looking in detail at the dissemination of, and resistance to, criminological theories in literary fiction, I will illuminate many of the tensions and anxieties that suffused late nineteenth-century culture and society. Far from merely reflecting some kind of reality, literature intrudes upon science, manipulates its most controversial outcomes, and fuels socio-cultural fears and anxieties.

Texts will be also analysed in their socio-historical and political milieus, going beyond traditional categorisations of Italian literature of the time, from

*verismo* to *decadentismo*, with a view to understanding the changes and generic transformations that led crime fiction to embody its various forms. I will seek to find some balance between an approach informed by cultural studies, which have sometimes concealed the textual individuality of the form by giving prominence to high-order issues of class, politics, and gender and sexuality, and a more text-based approach, which through the adoption of close-reading methodologies aims to recover lost or hidden meanings and to unleash the semantic potential that lies beyond textual resolution. A transnational perspective is also utilised: I will frequently cross borders between Italy, Great Britain, France, and the United States in order to provide a better understanding of the role of foreign authors in the evolution of the genre. Finally, to overcome problems of nomenclature, I will use the comprehensive term crime fiction, while also drawing on clear and well-established sub-categories when necessary, including detective fiction and psychological thrillers. I will also use the term Gothic not as a rigidly circumscribed and prescribed genre, but rather as a mode of writing that runs through the veins of modern literature. The utilisation of these expansive definitions aims to limit critical derogation and pigeon-holing as much as possible.<sup>61</sup>

I have divided this project into thematic areas that focus on diverse yet crucial aspects. Chapter one justifies the underlying critical perspective of the project by investigating in depth how and the way in which positivist criminologists contributed to the processes of reception and canonisation of fictions of crime in Italian culture. If crime writing possesses ideologically complex and richly discursive developments, its reception tells us much about how readers at the turn

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<sup>61</sup> I will not, therefore, utilise the term fantastic, although much of the work I will discuss in chapter five provides a sense of the fantastic.

of the nineteenth century organised and attempted to make sense of this new kind of writing. The critical texts I will analyse help us to understand how and why crime fiction was perceived as a threat to political and social order, as well as bringing to light the major role that the form played in embodying and calling attention to the conflict between critical and popular reading audiences at the turn of the century.

Chapter two and three aim to unearth the Gothic presence that lurks in the shadows of Italian crime literature. I argue that even in texts that do not display the obvious outer signals of the Gothic, authors draw on Gothic motifs with a range of effects that, sometimes paradoxically, serve to enhance the realistic component of the plot. Starting from the theorisation of Jerrold E. Hogle, who asserts that the power of the Gothic stems from ‘the way it helps us to address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural’, these two chapters inform new readings of crime stories as spaces in which normalcy and deviancy are negotiated and discussed.<sup>62</sup> Chapter two looks at the representation of the city as a Gothic place of darkness in a variety of post-unification texts that ambiguously attempt to intervene in the process of nation-building. Chapter three considers how the contemporary research on the nature and the mind of criminals largely filtered into Italian crime fiction, and analyses a selected number of transgressor-centred crime stories that variously scrutinise the innermost recesses of the criminal’s psyche, offering powerful explorations of evil human potential.

Chapter four and five investigate the troubled search for authority that characterises the post-unification period, marked by a strong tension between

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<sup>62</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, ‘Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-20 (p. 4).

secularism, religion, and occultism. Chapter four challenges the apparently conservative and comforting character of the detective story, examining an array of obscure detective-centred texts that unmask the brutal and authoritarian project of normalisation promoted by the state and frustrate its dream of total control over society. Chapter five follows in the footsteps of Ascari's claim that the secularisation of mystery and crime 'did not rule out, but rather facilitated, a certain amount of interaction between detection and the supernatural'.<sup>63</sup> By studying texts that occupy the grey zone between occultism and scientism, Gothic and modernity, this chapter seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the ways in which the late nineteenth century distinguished, related, and negotiated such terms as natural and supernatural.<sup>64</sup>

With this thesis, I hope to rectify several omissions, and to fill in a consistent gap in literary studies on nineteenth-century Italy. If, to employ an appropriate yet overused metaphor, the unfortunate fate of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian crime fiction reflects the famous case of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' (1844) – in plain sight all along, yet invariably overlooked – the hope is to carry out a better job than that the American author does in 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' (1842).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, p. 56. Michael Cook defines this association as 'perhaps the oldest and the most resilient in all popular genres'. Michael Cook, *Detective Fiction and the Ghost-Story. The Haunted Text* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 188.

<sup>64</sup> As Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell have argued, the complexity of the term supernatural in the nineteenth century was part of its appeal. They define it as 'slipper[y]' and 'resistant to definition', suggesting that it had a 'protean quality of being a cause, a place, a kind of being, a realm, a possibility, a new form of nature, [and] a hope for the future'. Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell, 'Introduction', in *The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. by Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-19 (p. 8).

<sup>65</sup> As well-known, Poe's detective abilities were severely tested and eventually frustrated when he unsuccessfully sought to solve one of the most famous real-life case of the nineteenth century, the shocking murder of Mary Rogers.

## Chapter 1. RECEPTION AND CANONISATION

Scholars have long accepted the assumption that the scarcity of Italian crime and detective stories between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was principally a consequence of the lack of contemporary critical debates about the existence and the relevance of such literature.<sup>1</sup> It was only in the 1930s, in concomitance with the explosion of the *giallo*, a publishing phenomenon of unprecedented scale, that critics and intellectuals began to comment on the relationship between the Italian nation and this emerging genre. For instance, while critic Alberto Savinio affirmed that the Italian *giallo* is ‘assurdo per ipotesi’ because quintessentially Anglo-Saxon, writer Augusto De Angelis replied that the ‘romanzo poliziesco è il frutto – frutto rosso di sangue [...] della nostra epoca’ and reminded his audience that violence and crime had always been inextricably associated with Italy within the European cultural imaginary.<sup>2</sup>

After all, it is true that the consistent utilisation of crime as a focal theme in many nineteenth-century European novels did not spark vehement discussions within the Italian literary establishment. Specific works, for instance Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-3), were initially reproached for their exaggerated violence, while writers such as Gabriele D’Annunzio became the target of a general anti-decadent criticism at the beginning of the twentieth century, but critics did not generally account for, nor were

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<sup>1</sup> Past, *Methods of Murder*, p. 3; Pezzotti, *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Alberto Savinio, *Palchetti romani* (Milan: Adelphi, 1982), p. 85; Augusto De Angelis, ‘Conferenza sul giallo (in tempi neri)’, *La lettura*, 80.3 (1980), pp. 27-44 (p. 30). Savinio’s comment originally appeared in the weekly *Omnibus* in July 1938, while De Angelis’ article is taken from a lecture he gave in 1939.

particularly concerned with, the major novelists' exploitation of crime elements.<sup>3</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, for instance, albeit dismissed by part of the bourgeois readership as a mere exponent of the *feuilleton*, was extolled by those intellectuals and novelists who could read his works in French translations, including an enthusiast Luigi Capuana.<sup>4</sup> Émile Zola received occasional criticism, for instance by intellectuals like Pasquale Villari, but his canonical status was eventually officially sanctioned by Francesco De Sanctis, the founding father of Italian literary criticism in the 1870s.<sup>5</sup>

Popular forms of crime writing, instead, including serialised novels and short-stories that appeared in newspapers and magazines, were invariably dismissed as intellectually and aesthetically worthless. Critics found very little to say about texts that drew their popularity from their own rapid responses to changing socio-cultural concerns, although they recognised that, as an anonymous critic of the prestigious *Fanfulla della domenica* points out, 'questi romanzi pieni di avventure e scritti con l'intendimento di far venire la pelle d'oca ai lettori [...] ha[nno] un pubblico di lettori molto più numeroso del romanzo d'analisi'.<sup>6</sup> Critics frequently equated popularity with triviality, thereby casting those very few discussions concerning crime narratives exclusively in terms of the binary opposition between high and low literature. Intellectuals and writers prevalently

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<sup>3</sup> Sue's novel was largely rejected when initially translated into Italian in 1848: 'è discusso, accettato o respinto ai margini dell'incandescente contesto della questione sociale, come esempio di romanzo contemporaneo, contrapposto al romanzo storico'. Enrico Ghidetti, 'Per una storia del romanzo popolare in Italia: i "misteri" di Toscana', in Enrico Ghidetti, *Il sogno della ragione: dal racconto fantastico al romanzo popolare* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987), pp. 85-117 (p. 93). D'Annunzio's poetic work, in particular, sparked a heated debate because of its strongly erotic component. His collection of verse, *Intermezzo di rime* (1883), led him to be branded a pornographer in the eyes of the middle class. See Bruno P.F. Wanrooij, *Storia del pudore: la questione sessuale in Italia 1860-1940* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Sergia Adamo, *Dostoevskij in Italia. Il dibattito sulle riviste 1869-1945* (Pasian di Prato: Campanotto Editore, 1998), p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Silvana Monti, 'La ricezione di Zola in Italia', in *Le due sponde del mediterraneo. L'immagine riflessa*, ed. by Giovanna Trisolini (Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 1999), pp. 123-35.

<sup>6</sup> 'Libri nuovi', *Fanfulla della domenica*, 45, November 4<sup>th</sup> 1888, p. 3.

identified popular fiction as a foreign, specifically French, product, that lay outside the realm of art. For example, in a letter sent to Vittorio Bersezio, Matilde Serao wrote that her novel *Cuore inferno* (1881) ‘non entra nel gran genere degli intrighi complicatissimi, dei colpi di scena, e delle altre bizzarrie da Ponson du Terrail. Sono cose false e convenzionali codeste, perché la vita non ha questi colpi di scena imprevisi’.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, D’Annunzio, in a letter sent to his friend, translator Georges Hèrelle, who had asked him for information about Francesco Mastriani, claimed, ‘voi mi chiedeste un giorno se i romanzi del Mastriani sieno interessanti. Sono interessanti come quelli del Gaboriau o del Montépin, ma sono *fuori dall’arte*, assolutamente’.<sup>8</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that the works of the two most popular and prolific Italian novelists of the century, the aforementioned Francesco Mastriani and Carolina Invernizio, were rarely cited in magazines and literary journals.<sup>9</sup> In one of the exceptions, the review of Invernizio’s *Le figlie della duchessa* (1887) contained in ‘La gazzetta letteraria’, the anonymous critic reinstates the idea that popular fiction ‘esorbita dal campo dell’arte, retto com’è da leggi e da criteri affatto speciali’.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of all of this, as Alessio Berrè has demonstrated in his rich study on the

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<sup>7</sup> Matilde Serao to Vittorio Bersezio, January 1880, in Rossana Melis, “‘Ci ho lavorato col cuore’”: 24 lettere di Matilde Serao a Vittorio Bersezio (1878-1885)’, *Studi Piemontesi*, 29.2 (2000), 363-89 (p. 378).

<sup>8</sup> Gabriele D’Annunzio to Georges Hèrelle, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1893, *Carteggio D’Annunzio – Hèrelle (1891-1931)*, ed. by Mario Crimini (Lanciano: Carabba, 2004), p. 234. Emphasis in the text.

<sup>9</sup> The only Italian popular writer who received some critical attention was the Florentine Giulio Piccini, who wrote several crime novels between the 1880s and 1890s under the pen name of Jarro. Many of his texts were reviewed in literary journals, presumably due to the influence exerted by his very influential Milanese publisher Treves. The critical response was ambivalent. He has a great imagination, critics acknowledge, but his works are trivial, empty of all content. Even though Jarro’s stories were not seen as ‘good’ literature in a proper sense, one anonymous critic acknowledged that he knew how to capture the attention of the reader, and how to maintain it throughout the novel: ‘l’azione [...] è rapida, è ricca, è drammatica. Quell’accumularsi di avvenimenti finisce per divertire il lettore: e un lettore che si diverte è un giudice indulgente, benevolo. Il merito artistico dell’opera è ben povero, anzi dire quasi nullo; pero essa costituisce una prova della doviziosa fantasia dell’A., e riesce perciò a farci passare qualche ora di dilettevole ricreazione’. Locksley, ‘Libri nuovi’, in *Fanfulla della domenica*, 47, November 19<sup>th</sup> 1893, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Fra romanzieri e novellieri’, *La gazzetta letteraria*, 39, September 28<sup>th</sup> 1889.

figure of the delinquent in nineteenth-century Italian literature, Italy was a very fertile territory for debates on crime literature.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, the constant infiltration of positivist criminology into the literary sector played a pivotal role.<sup>12</sup> Since the 1870s, positivist criminologists and sociologists fuelled inquiries about the relationship between literature and crime by massively inserting artistic and literary evidence of criminality within their scientific studies in order to bolster, legitimise, and popularise the theories about the strictly biological foundations of delinquency.<sup>13</sup> Literature, especially Dante, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare, constituted one of the most effective instruments on which scientists could rely when presenting their ideas to the non-scientific community. The presence of literary and visual examples in the works of Italian criminologists did not simply represent scientific weakness, but served a larger political agenda. By combining different types of seemingly incompatible evidence, they achieved the desired rhetorical effect, strengthened their argument, and enlarged their circle of converts. As Jonathan Hiller observes, ‘Lombroso’s theories take on an air of authority underscoring that his scientific findings, despite their revolutionary new way of observing the world, have a continuity with the great authors of the past’.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Berrè, *Nemico della società*.

<sup>12</sup> The porous barrier between science and literature at the turn of the nineteenth century has been the centre of extensive analyses: see Annamaria Cavalli Pasini, *La scienza del romanzo. Romanzo e cultura scientifica tra Otto e Novecento* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1982); Nancy A. Harrowitz, *Antisemitism, Misogyny, and the Logic of Cultural Difference: Cesare Lombroso and Matilde Serao* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Mary Gibson, ‘Science and Narrative in Italian Criminology, 1880-1920’, in *Crime and Culture. An Historical Perspective*, ed. by Amy Gilman Srebnick and René Lévy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 37-47; Edwige Comoy Fusaro, *La nevrosi tra medicina e letteratura. Approccio epistemologico alle malattie nervose nella narrativa italiana (1865-1922)* (Florence: Polistampa, 2007); Renzo Villa, ‘Il ‘metodo sperimentale clinico’: Cesare Lombroso scienziato e romanziere’, in *Cesare Lombroso cento anni dopo*, pp. 127-140.

<sup>13</sup> Daniele Velo Dalbrenta, ‘La finzione più vera. Studi sugli archetipi letterari della devianza nel pensiero penalpositivistico italiano’, in *Diritto e letteratura: prospettive di ricerca*, ed. by Carla Faralli and Maria Paola Mittica (Rome: Aracne, 2010), pp. 321-40. Jonathan R. Hiller, ‘Lombroso and the Science of Literature and Opera’, *The Cesare Lombroso Handbook*, pp. 226-52.

<sup>14</sup> Hiller, ‘Lombroso and the Science of Literature and Opera’, p. 230.



The enormous impact of Lombroso's hybrid science on the culture of the late nineteenth century has amongst its corollaries the development of a school formed by scholars who apply his approach and theories specifically to literary works. From the 1890s, a vast range of critical studies appeared at an increasing rate, aiming to test and analyse the representation of the delinquent in various literary/non-literary discourses on criminality.<sup>15</sup> Scientists were convinced that the criminal constituted a throwback to an earlier human form, which could be discerned by virtue of a number of distinguishing atavistic features; whereas scientists have to resort to tools and measurements to identify the delinquent, artists can utilise their power of intuition to bring to the fore the characteristics that make the criminal a specific type.

It is precisely in the context of these debates concerning the portrayal of criminality in art and literature that we can grasp how crime narratives were received, understood, discussed, negotiated, and finally crystallised within these crucial years. Starting from these premises, this chapter investigates the historical and theoretical assumptions regarding the character and evolution of crime fiction that ripened between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries in the work of various criminologists and

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<sup>15</sup> Cesare Lombroso, 'Il tipo criminale nella letteratura', in Cesare Lombroso, *Le più recenti scoperte ed applicazioni della psichiatria ed antropologia criminale* (Turin: Bocca, 1893), pp. 339-63; Enrico Ferri, *I delinquenti nell'arte* (Genoa: Libreria Editrice Ligure, 1896); Vincenzo Melissari, *Il delitto nell'arte e nella poesia* (Messina: Editrice dell'Iride Mamertina, 1899); Scipio Sighele, *Delitti e delinquenti danteschi* (Trento: Scotoni e Vitti, 1896); *Letteratura tragica* (Milan: Treves, 1906). Luigi Mariano Patrizi, *Saggio psico-antropologico su Giacomo Leopardi e la sua famiglia* (Turin: Bocca, 1896); Giuseppe Ziino, *Shakespeare e la scienza moderna. Studio medico-psicologico e giuridico* (Palermo: D'Amico, 1897); Alfredo Niceforo, *Criminali e degenerati dell'Inferno dantesco* (Torino: Bocca, 1898); Cesare Leggiadri Laura, *Il delinquente nei Promessi Sposi. Ricerche d'antropologia criminale e di critica scientifica* (Torino: Bocca, 1899); Fausto Schillace in *Le tendenze presenti della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Roux Frassati e C., 1899); Nicolò D'Alfonso, *Note psicologiche, estetiche e criminali ai drammi di G. Shakespeare: Macbeth, Amleto, Re Lear, Otello* (Milan: Società editrice libraria, 1914); Alfredo Niceforo, *Critica e biografia psico-fisiologica del pittore criminale Michelangelo da Caravaggio (1569-1609)* (Modena: Società Tipografica Modenese, 1918). Criminological studies of art and literature appeared in France and Germany as well. See Edouard Lefort, *Le type criminel d'après les savants et les artistes* (Lyon: Storck, 1892); Benedikt Moritz, 'Kriminalanthropologie in der Kunst und in der Wissenschaft', *Deutsche Revue über das gesamte nationale Leben der Gegenwart*, 23 (1898), 165-77.

jurists, who attempted to map the form's heterogeneous nature by surveying the often antagonistic relations that existed amongst practitioners of crime writing.

The examination of the complex fortune of crime narratives not only sets the ground for a close analysis of the literary texts and their interplay with scientific works in the chapters to come, but also sheds further light on the formation of the genre and its cultural status. Moreover, it helps us to uncover the roots of critical approaches to the study of crime fiction that are still largely perpetuated today, including the marginalisation of popular literature and the identification and categorisation of the *giallo* as a hyper-rational genre exclusively pivoting on the element of detection. In many ways, crime fiction's reception in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries has shaped its subsequent status and valuation for over a century.

### 1.1 Literature of Subversion

In the aftermath of the unification, literature played a crucial role in the construction of the identity of the new-born state. Francesco De Sanctis' monumental *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870-1) constitutes the most significant attempt to build a history of Italian literature since the Middle Ages as a way of educating patriotic young citizens.<sup>16</sup> Positivist criminologists placed great value on the uplifting and educative capacities of literature as well, seeing in literary creation an effective instrument for intervening in the education of Italy's citizens of all social backgrounds, as well as for the diffusion of

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<sup>16</sup> Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883) was the most important literary critic in nineteenth-century Italy. He realised, since the birth of the new Kingdom, the importance of the use of history as a political weapon. He sought to provide with ideological legitimacy the new state against those who were trying to delegitimise it, especially the Catholic Church.

morals and for the formation of character.<sup>17</sup> It is thus unsurprising that, especially at first, they acknowledged with suspicion the increasing proliferation of texts that largely featured figures of criminals. In the first edition of *L'uomo delinquente* (1876), Lombroso indicts the contemporary novel for its extreme violence and its capitalisation on crime, while also emphasising the inability of writers to portray scientifically and realistically the physiognomy and the behaviour of criminals.<sup>18</sup> Only a 'cattivo romanziere' could describe criminals as 'uomini spaventevoli d'aspetto, barbati infino agli occhi, con isguardo scintillante e feroce, con nasi aquilini'.<sup>19</sup> Criminology, Lombroso remarks, 'vuol cifre, e non descrizioni isolate, generiche; soprattutto quando deve applicarsi alla medicina forense'.<sup>20</sup>

In the following years, though, a concurrence of different factors made criminologists gradually aware of the ideological quality but also the subversive potential of such literature. A first element to consider was the rise of the modern press and its exploitation of criminal cases. Crime reporting, with its ability to engage the reader through a sense of dramatic immediacy, helped to boost the circulation of the modern newspapers and the proliferation of magazines and journals that collected the most interesting criminal trials held in the Court of Assizes.<sup>21</sup> As Thomas Simpson

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<sup>17</sup> Scipio Sighele, for instance, affirms that 'senza dubbio sono i costumi che creano la letteratura, ma questa a sua volta può influenzare i costumi'. Sighele, *Letteratura tragica*, pp. 200-1. He considers literature, as Andrea Rondini points out, 'depositaria di un "vero", assunto quale valore antecedente e alla fine sostitutivo del giudizio estetico'. Andrea Rondini, 'Il pazzo, il delinquente, la folla: Scipio Sighele critico letterario', *Commentari dell'ateneo di Brescia* (1995), 227-65 (p. 229).

<sup>18</sup> Whilst he asserts that Italy 'si pregia forse più di tutte le nazioni d'Europa per castità nelle lettere e nelle belle arti', in France and Great Britain, due to the works of Sue, Dumas, Gaboriau, Charles Dickens, and Wilkie Collins 'va penetrando il triste miasma del bagno e del meretricio, suo degno congiunto, per entro alla letteratura'. Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente studiato in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale ed alle discipline carcerarie* (Milan: Ulrico-Hoepli, 1876), p. 119.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> Crime narratives increased newspaper revenues to such an extent that magazines were established with a focus on the crime genre alone. From the late 1870s, a huge variety of journals

underscores, Italian journalists such as Luigi Cesana, who founded the newspaper *Il Messaggero* in Rome in 1878, realised that by devoting intense coverage to crime news and combining advances in telegraphy and typography with cheaper modes of distribution they could increase their popularity and meet the needs of an audience that was gradually taking shape.<sup>22</sup> A second crucial factor was the increasing circulation of translations of foreign crime writers, in particular Edgar Allan Poe, Emile Gaboriau, and Arthur Conan Doyle.<sup>23</sup> In order to appeal to a larger audience, newspapers such as *Il Pungolo* began to publish the crime stories of Gaboriau since 1874, while *Il Secolo* started serialising the popular novels of Victor Hugo, Ponson Du Terrail, Charles Dickens, Luigi Motta, and Emilio Salgari since 1869.<sup>24</sup> At the turn of the century, the appearance of Conan Doyle's

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concerned with crime – *Gazzetta dei tribunali* (1877) and *Cronaca dei tribunali: rivista popolare giudiziaria* (1878) in Turin; *La corte d'assise: rivista popolare giudiziaria* (1879) in Milan; *Gazzetta dei tribunali: cronaca settimanale* (1886) in Rome; *La tribuna giudiziaria: gazetta settimanale illustrata* (1887) in Naples – began to flourish throughout the country. Initially, these publications were essentially targeted at a specialised audience, made up of lawyers and legal experts, but from the 1880s onwards many of them began to target a broader public. As well as containing crime reports, they gave much space to the detailed narration of public trials, especially those involving murders, and to debates of national interest, including those related to the promulgation of the criminal code. See Sergia Adamo, 'Mondo giudiziario e riscrittura narrativa dopo l'Unità', *Problemi*, 113 (1999), 70-98 (p. 73)

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Simpson, *Murder and Media in the New Rome: The Fadda Affair* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> The impact that Poe had on Italian literature was remarkable. The first anonymous Italian translation of Poe, which was made from Baudelaire's, dates back to 1858, when the collection of tales *Storie orribili* [no translator indicated] (Turin: Eredi Botta, 1858) originally appeared. It included 'Berenice' (1835), 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843), 'The Black Cat' (1843), and 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845). The first publication of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) appeared in appendix to the volume *Storia meravigliosa di Pietro Schlemihl* [no translator indicated] (Milan: Daelli, 1863) written by Adalbert von Chamisso. While the first substantial collection was *Storie incredibili* (Milan: Pirola, 1869), which included twelve Gothic and fantastic tales translated by Baccio Emanuele Manieri, a Milanese exponent of the *Scapigliatura*, the most successful edition was Poe's *Racconti straordinari* [no translator indicated] (Milan: Sonzogno, 1883). The latter, which was reprinted in 1889, 1904, and 1932, presented another translation of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'. Two years later, in *Nuovi racconti straordinari* (1885), the first Italian version of 'The Purloined Letter' (1844) appeared. For an overview of the role of Poe in Italy see Costanza Melani, *Effetto Poe: influssi dello scrittore americano sulla letteratura italiana* (Florence: Florence University Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Emile Gaboriau had an intense but brief literary career between 1865 and 1873, in which he wrote a variety of crime stories that mingled detection with the melodrama of the *feuilleton*. Unlike other contemporary French writers, though, he gave prominence to patterns such as the scientific investigation and the search for clues, and he filled the texts with mysterious twists and

Sherlock Holmes adventures, introduced to the public in 1895 through the collection of short-stories *Le avventure di Sherlock Holmes* and then serialised in the weekly *La Domenica del Corriere* since 1899, constituted a key turning point, which increased the demand for popular crime narratives and opened up fictional opportunities that many Italian writers started to embrace.<sup>25</sup> This period also saw the birth of popular magazines and journals that presented a vast assortment of both foreign and Italian short-stories combining crime, Gothic, sensational, and fantastic elements, including the widely read *Giornale illustrato dei viaggi e delle avventure di terra e di mare*, founded by Edoardo Sonzogno in 1878.<sup>26</sup>

All things considered, it is understandable why in the 1890s and 1900s criminological texts focusing on literature started flourishing. Lombroso, as Berrè has noted, changed his opinion towards the contemporary novel precisely when he realised that the popularity of these texts could be used to support and spread his scientific theories.<sup>27</sup> In the chapter ‘Il tipo criminale nella letteratura’, contained in *Le più recenti scoperte ed applicazioni della psichiatria ed antropologia criminale* (1893), Lombroso praises authors such as Balzac, Zola, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy for their ability to either anticipate or conform to the scientific representations of criminality as promoted by the

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unexpected but rational explanations. His major novels, especially those with Monsieur Lecoq as sleuth, had a great international impact, and became a powerful model for international crime fiction.

<sup>25</sup> Sherlock Holmes stories originally appeared in Italy in 1895, when the publishing house Verri printed the volume *Le avventure di Sherlock Holmes. Romanzo illustrato* [no translator indicated] (Milan: Verri, 1895). Curiously though, this book features only three of Conan Doyle’s tales — ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’ (1891), ‘The Adventure of the Red-Headed League’ and ‘Silver Blaze’ (1893) — as well as other short-stories written by both Italian and French authors. Conan Doyle’s corpus was then wholly published in instalments in *La Domenica del Corriere*. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* appeared in 1899, followed by *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1900-1), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902-3), *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1904-5), and *The Valley of Fear* (1915).

<sup>26</sup> See Foni, *Alla fiera dei mostri*; Valentino Cecchetti, *Generi della letteratura popolare: feuilleton, fascicoli, fotoromanzi in Italia dal 1870 ad oggi* (Latina: Tunué, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Berrè, *Nemico della società*, p. 38.

positivist school, and considers art and literature as able to convey scientific truths even more persuasively than science itself.<sup>28</sup> In the following ‘Il delinquente e il pazzo nel dramma e nel romanzo moderno’ (1899), he goes so far as to assert that the literary world has been enormously influenced by his scientific discoveries, and that delinquency and insanity are two major constituents of contemporary literature.<sup>29</sup>

Scipio Sighele, one of the founders of mass psychology, followed in the footsteps of Lombroso in his *Letteratura tragica* (1906), which appeared in France with the more suggestive title *Littérature et criminalité* (1908).<sup>30</sup> Sighele asserts that ‘allo scrittore

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Mi sono più volte domandato perché l’antropologia criminale sia più avanzata nella letteratura che non nella scienza. I grandi maestri russi, svedesi e francesi del romanzo e del dramma moderno vi hanno tutti attinto le loro più grandi ispirazioni, cominciando da Balzac [...] a Daudet, Zola, Dostoevsky e Ibsen. [...] Nessuno dubita della verità di *Jacques* di Zola o della *Soeur Elise* di Goncourt, mentre perfino alienisti possono mostrare tutto inamidato e pieno il sussiego e anche il diniego accademico, quando si parla dell’analogia fra l’epilettico e il delinquente-nato. Gli è che quando siamo in presenza di queste figure vere fatteci balenare dai grandi artisti, la coscienza del vero che in tutti noi dormicchia, per quanto fatturata e assopita dalle stortiture della scuola, si risveglia, si ribella alle bugie convenzionali che le vengono imposte, tanto più facilmente che l’arte ha abbellito, e qualche volta ingigantito i contorni del vero e resili più evidenti, e quindi ha reso molto minore lo sforzo per impossessarsene.’ Lombroso, *Le più recenti scoperte ed applicazioni della psichiatria ed antropologia criminale*, p. 339.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Chi frequentando le scene confronta il dramma moderno coll’antico, ed anche con quello di pochi anni fa, è sorpreso dall’enorme differenza dei caratteri dei personaggi; e soprattutto dalla strana frequenza dei protagonisti pazzi o criminali. Siamo giunti a tanto che si può esser sicuri, andando ad un nuovo capolavoro di Ibsen, per esempio, di vedervi tre o quattro pazzi o birbi, quando i personaggi non lo siano tutti, e ciascuno di essi ha dei caratteri così particolari che sembrano proprio scolpiti da un alienista o da un antropologo criminale’. Cesare Lombroso, ‘Il delinquente ed il pazzo nel dramma e nel romanzo moderno’. Cesare Lombroso, ‘Il delinquente e il pazzo nel dramma e nel romanzo moderno’, *Nuova Antologia*, 69, 173 (1899), 665-81 (p. 665).

<sup>30</sup> Scipio Sighele (1868-1913) was a jurist, sociologist, cultural and literary critic who extensively explored group behaviour and the power of suggestion upon collective crime. In *La folla delinquente* (1891), he argues that the individual is strongly affected by being in a crowd, and his or her presence entails various consequences for the question of responsibility. Sighele was also obsessed with the drama of the influence of one person on another. In *La coppia criminale* (1893), he argues that the social bond within the couple is founded on the secret power of suggestion, which is thus regarded as a social factor and a scientific fact that needs further critical attention. Scipio Sighele, *La folla delinquente* (Turin: Bocca, 1891); *La coppia criminale: studio di psicologia morbosa* (Turin: Bocca, 1893), p. 4. Apart from his *Letteratura tragica*, Sighele investigated the domain of literature in *Nell’arte e nella scienza* (Milan: Treves, 1911) and in *Letteratura e sociologia. Saggi postumi* (Milan: Treves, 1914). In the first study, he analyses various aspects regarding the relationship between literature and science, while also examining the female characters in D’Annunzio’s corpus, and the work of Balzac in light of criminological theories. The second volume contains a handful of posthumous essays on contemporary issues

di talento deve essere permesso tutto, perché egli analizza il male e l'oscenità e li riproduce artisticamente, non per esaltarli, ma per mostrarne l'orrore'.<sup>31</sup> The criterion of 'literary talent' to determine the value of a literary work is particularly vague as well as slippery if employed, as Sighele does, to extol D'Annunzio and Zola – for 'le brutture da lui messe in luce [...] non costituivano [...] l'elogio e l'apoteosi del male: anzi ne volevano essere [...] la più fiera condanna' – and, on the contrary, to condemn Hugo, Byron, Schiller, and Sand, who are accused of aestheticising violence and glorifying the murder.<sup>32</sup> It is clear how Lombroso's and Sighele's works serve a political purpose. If a literary text challenges or does not conform to the conceptualisation of delinquency as theorised by positivist criminology it is either disavowed or even rejected as dangerous.

Yet such a growing appreciation for texts that make an extensive use of crime elements inevitably collides with the educative, edifying, and even moralistic view of literary creation that positivist criminologists largely displayed. This inherent contradiction is exposed in a lecture called *Il delitto nell'arte* that the jurist and politician Bernardino Alimena delivered at the University of Cagliari on February 25 1899, in which he harshly critiques both the contemporary novel and the recent, disproportionate attention that science has been devoting to the investigation of art and literature.<sup>33</sup> Alimena is aware that literature, 'per i mezzi di cui dispone, e per le masse alle quali si rivolge, è la più adatta a propagare e a popolarizzare le conoscenze, che, altrimenti, resterebbero chiuse nel dominio di pochi', and he is thus greatly concerned with the

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such as the role of the new woman in society, as well as essays on writers like Tolstoy, Émile Faguet, Paul Bourget and Maurice Barrès.

<sup>31</sup> Sighele, *Letteratura tragica*, p. 238.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 239. 'La glorificazione del delitto, del resto, è stata la grande aberrazione della letteratura romantica'. Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>33</sup> Bernardino Alimena (1861-1915) was one of the leading moderate social-defence jurists in Italy at the turn of the century, mainly remembered for being the founder of the so-called *terza scuola*, which aimed to conciliate the classic and positivist schools of criminology.

excessive and unreasonable importance that the contemporary novel gives to criminals and the dark side of society: ‘di questo passo, la così detta arte modernissima finirà col diventare, essa stessa, una delle cause sociali del delitto’.<sup>34</sup> Contemporary literature, Alimena insists, ‘non è arte’, for ‘l’arte, la sola che abbia diritto ad un tale nome, è l’arte socialmente utile’.<sup>35</sup>

While the frequent emphasis on criminality underlying much contemporary literature sparked mixed and sometimes contradictory reactions within the Italian cultural establishment, intellectuals, critics, and criminologists agreed on the intrinsic dangerousness of popular forms of crime writing. Lombroso and Sighele utilise the terms *letteratura criminale* and *letteratura dei processi* respectively to analyse popular fiction alongside a large and heterogeneous output that include journal articles, broadsheets, broadsides, collections of trials, and rehashes of real-life hearings.<sup>36</sup> According to them, this form of literature is primarily consumed by the lower classes, and represents, as

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<sup>34</sup> Bernardino Alimena, *Il delitto nell’arte* (Turin: Bocca, 1899) pp. 13, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 16. The contradiction that lies at the heart of positivist criminology’s celebration of contemporary is unmasked also in the work of the lawyer Alfredo Epifania. In the brief *Il delitto nell’arte*, Epifania contends that ‘è del tutto erroneo, ed antiscientifico fare della critica letteraria alla stregua delle intuizioni e dei risultati delle scienze psichiatriche. L’indagine scientifica ravviva ed avvalorà l’intuizione artistica, ma non può né deve confondersi con questa; [...] Ed il voler classificare gli eroi dell’arte nelle dubbie categorie dei delinquenti e dei pazzi, nella quale la esagerazione dei discepoli troppo entusiasti delle verità proclamate più cautamente dai maestri, si compiace di distribuire la gran maggioranza degli uomini, è tentativo pericoloso che contrasta ai principi più sicuri e accettati dei metodi che governano la ricerca sperimentale. Sul fittizio e sul fantastico non può studiarsi la realtà, né l’artista nella creazione dei suoi personaggi obbedisce ai rigori logici delle verità scientifiche, né si propone di confermarle o di negarle’. Alfredo Epifania, *Il delitto nell’arte* (Spoleto: Premiata Tipografia dell’Umbria, 1908), p. 19. He concludes that ‘l’arte non obbedisce a teologie estranee alla sua vera missione; ed il voler vedere nelle sue manifestazioni veristiche e nelle descrizioni del mondo del delitto un adempimento di una funzione sociale è un degradarla’. Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Migliaia sono pur troppo le storie di delinquenti, edite rozzamente, in quella specie di biblioteca anonima, che con assai scarso vantaggio del popolo, e spesso molto a suo danno, continua, col mezzo della stampa, quell’opera semistorica, semifantastica, che un tempo tessevano le canzoni dei poeti ciclici. [...] Non v’è processo, anzi delitto grave, che non ne faccia spuntare qualcheduna [...] questa specie di letteratura criminale [...] è una creazione del popolo’. Lombroso, *L’uomo delinquente studiato in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale ed alle discipline carcerarie*, pp. 109-10.



Sighele puts it, ‘uno sfogo delle latenti tendenze criminali del popolo’.<sup>37</sup> Criminologists operate a sort of criminalisation of popular crime fiction, which is condemned as debased production pernicious to the State and to the morality of Italians. These texts, criminologists contend, are also largely consumed by delinquents, who find in their focus on excess and transgression – Lombroso mentions *The Newgate Calendar* (1773) – a sort of glorification of wrongdoing.<sup>38</sup> According to him, it is precisely ‘da queste letture [che i criminali] avevano avuto il primo impulso alla loro vita sregolata’.<sup>39</sup>

It is understandable why much of the debate underlying 1890s and 1900s discussions about crime fiction concerned precisely the role of crime literature to influence the attitudes and perceptions of its wider readership as well as its dangerous potential to subvert dominant structures of power.<sup>40</sup> Sighele is convinced that literature constitutes ‘uno strumento possente di educazione o di corruzione’, and he is thus afraid that the explosive growth of popular crime texts might have a negative impact on a readership that he describes as ‘nervoso e eccitabile’: ‘non è dunque solo il traviamiento dei sensi, ma anche il delitto che, in un organismo già predisposto, può sorgere a poco a poco e realizzarsi per la suggestione della letteratura’.<sup>41</sup> He goes so far as to compare the morbid curiosity of the public for ‘i drammi veramente vissuti che hanno il loro epilogo in Corte d’Assise’ with the ‘ferocia antica degli spettatori del circo che godevano a veder soffrire e a veder morire le vittime’.<sup>42</sup> The popularity of crime literature, ultimately,

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<sup>37</sup> Sighele, *Letteratura tragica*, p. 277.

<sup>38</sup> Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente studiato in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale ed alle discipline carcerarie*, p. 112.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>40</sup> The issue of the negative influence of crime literature can be found in a variety of scientific texts of this period, including Havelock Ellis’ *The Criminal* (1890), where the English physician accuses these texts of inspiring crimes and transgressions, as well as contributing to the increase of criminal activities amongst young people. Havelock Ellis, *The Criminal* (S.I.: Walter Scott & Co., 1890), p.177.

<sup>41</sup> Sighele, *Letteratura tragica*, pp. 206, 234, 224.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 246-7.

indicates a general bloodlust and symptomatises the presence of a social pathology. It is the degenerate contemporary society that, as the intellectual and painter Giuseppe Sciuti Musmeci argues, ‘dà alla letteratura l’incremento abominevole, e l’arte, come il mansueto camaleonte della foresta, prende il colore dello sfondo in cui vive’.<sup>43</sup> He defines popular crime fiction as ‘letteratura rosseggiante’ and ‘genere più infesto [...] letteratura più infame che, invertendo completamente la propria missione d’insegnare il buono ed il bello, osa gridare all’uomo: uccidi, fiacca’.<sup>44</sup> Popular novelists such as Francesco Mastriani, Xavier de Montépin, and Eugène Sue, Sciuti Musmeci maintains, ‘non fanno altro che cercare [...] la perla lorda e deturpata dell’arte’.<sup>45</sup>

The crucial factor that made the sudden popularity of crime fiction so upsetting is that it made manifest the vast, perhaps unexpected, quantity of Italian readers, who might become threatening to those intellectuals, critics, and government officials for their ability to affect Italian taste and morals. Following in the footsteps of Foucault, who asserts that power and knowledge ‘imply one another; that there is no power relation without a correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations’, it is possible to uncover the way in which positivist criminologists, together with those who shared their assumptions, manipulated and shaped discourses on crime literature.<sup>46</sup> In the same way in which they exercised disciplinary forms of power by establishing a series of rules and norms that came to constitute the authority responsible for the identification of dangerous individuals, they used metaphors of illness and medicine in literary discourse,

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<sup>43</sup> Giuseppe Sciuti Musmeci, *Il delitto nell’arte* (Acireale: Tipografia Editrice XX Secolo, 1906), p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 27.

disseminating specific criteria to assess a work of fiction that came to represent accepted knowledge about literature concerning crime.<sup>47</sup> The medicalisation of the vocabulary of politics largely informed the literary sector, and criminal bodies and criminal texts became symptoms of the same pathology and scrutinised in the quest for signs of danger and degeneration. Sighele describes the public interest for such literature as a ‘vero fenomeno patologico’, while the criminologist Alfredo Niceforo defines this ‘letteratura del basso popolo [...] deforme, orrenda, terrificante [...] una malattia del secolo’.<sup>48</sup> Pathologies in a social body which was painstakingly being normalised were thus detected so that they could metaphorically be exorcised and expelled. Positivist criminology became the arbiter of normality and exerted power through its ability to medically classify individuals as normal or abnormal, and to categorise crime literature as acceptable or unacceptable, edifying or dangerous. The genre seems thus to be central to the way that positivism organised and understood culture. Literature and art were used in order to consolidate discursive hegemony and assert the purview of the medical gaze over all segments of society. I contend that the scrutiny of crime writing was a political act, and that the central point of contention among various criminologists was the social function that the novel was expected to perform in the new liberal order. Crime texts were analysed and evaluated according to this criterion, and their nature was actualised or neutralised in conformity with it. The forms of surveillance, investigation, classification, and normalisation that according to Foucault became part of the state apparatus for policing behaviour in the nineteenth century, were utilised by criminologists to control and shape the discourses on culture, literature and, as a consequence, contemporary

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<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘About the Concept of the “Dangerous Individual” in 19th-Century Legal Psychiatry’, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 1 (1978) 1-18.

<sup>48</sup> Sighele, *Letteratura tragica*, p. 258; Alfredo Niceforo, *Parigi. Una città rinnovata* (Turin: Bocca, 1911), p. 238.

society.<sup>49</sup>

Crime fiction's critical reception in the late nineteenth century can thus be read as a regulatory discourse that functions as an implicit threat to both readers and writers possibly attracted to the form. The general suspicion generated by crime literature and, more specifically, the obsession of positivist criminologists towards the influence of popular forms of crime fiction reveal that the governing élite perfectly understood the potentially disruptive nature of this literature and the role it plays in the construction of national identity. Hence, it is interesting to note how such anxieties continued to permeate Italian culture throughout the interwar years. The article 'Produzione "gialla" e suggestione criminale' written in 1937 by Tancredi Gatti, professor of criminal law at the University of Rome, is a further confirmation of the extent to which positivist thought, with its fears and obsessions, continued to be a hegemonic cultural force and was also able to dictate social policy at state and regional levels well into the Fascist era.<sup>50</sup> Gatti draws on a positivist approach to explore the long-standing links between crime fiction and contagion. Interestingly, Gatti no longer refers to literature, but rather accuses crime films of exercising 'un potente fascino sulle masse di mediocre o addirittura bassa levatura intellettuale, i quali sono in prevalenza i pubblici dei cinematografi'.<sup>51</sup> The excessive importance given to criminal figures, coupled with frequent representations of the police forces as 'crassamente o grossolanamente inette' contribute, according to him,

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<sup>49</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 217, 227, 220.

<sup>50</sup> Tancredi Gatti, 'Produzione "gialla" e suggestione criminale', *La giustizia penale*, 43 (1937) pp. 578-86. It is also worth mentioning that during the Fascist regime studies on the relationship between delinquency and literature did not become unfashionable, as it is testified by the reprint of Ferri's *I delinquenti nell'arte* in 1926 and the appearance of critical works such as *Pazzi, squilibrati e delinquenti nelle opera dei letterati* (Bergamo: C. Conti & C. Editori, 1926-1930), written by the psychiatrist Luigi Lugiato and prefaced by Enrico Morselli. The four volumes, which were published between 1926 and 1930, were devoted to Shakespeare, Zola, Manzoni, and D'Annunzio respectively.

<sup>51</sup> Gatti, 'Produzione "gialla" e suggestione criminale', p. 582.

to inspiring misdeeds and to increasing the number of criminals.<sup>52</sup> The way in which the Fascist government intervened in the creative production of works of crime fiction, culminating in the administration's ultimate decision in 1941 to prevent publication of crime novels, testifies to the strength and endurance of the debate concerning the potential dangerousness of popular crime stories. As Elena Past points out, in the Fascist era the fear was that '*gialli* might teach citizens how to challenge the status quo'.<sup>53</sup>

## 1.2 From Crime to Detective Fiction

Enrico Ferri, arguably the most famous and influential amongst the many disciples of Lombroso, is the first to introduce the figure of the literary detective in his critical study *I delinquenti nell'arte* (1896). It may surprise that, in a work that mostly involves the figure of the criminal in literature, Ferri examines the corpus of Emile Gaboriau, the founding father of what the criminologist calls the *romanzo giudiziario*, alongside Greek tragedies and canonical authors such as Hugo, Zola, D'Annunzio, and Dostoevsky.<sup>54</sup> Through the analysis of Gaboriau's debut *L'affaire Lerouge* (1866), Ferri illustrates the characteristics of an emerging genre that, unlike most contemporary novels, which are centred on figures of delinquency, foregrounds a detective and hinges to a large degree on the investigation of a crime:

Nel romanzo giudiziario però il delinquente rimane in seconda linea ed è quasi sempre una figura impersonale, una specie di manichino, messo in

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 579.

<sup>53</sup> Past, *Methods of Murder*, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> 'Alcuni anni fa ebbe gran voga un genere di romanzi giudiziari, di cui Emilio Gaboriau fu l'iniziatore, imitato poi da tanti altri, che – per le appendici dei giornali o per le biblioteche romantiche a buon mercato – avevano trovato un filone di emozioni artistiche da sfruttare presso il pubblico più numeroso'. Ferri, *I delinquenti nell'arte*, pp. 69-70.

gioco soltanto per rappresentare un delitto misterioso. Il protagonista vero in tali opere d'arte è la polizia giudiziaria, personificata in qualche tipo di segugio fine e geniale, dalla logica sottile, dall'odorato squisito nella caccia all'uomo delinquente, in mezzo ed attraverso gli indizi più vaghi e in apparenza meno insignificanti di un delitto sanguinoso allora scoperto.<sup>55</sup>

The attention devoted to Gaboriau signals that as early as 1896 the detective story was perceived as an autonomous and codified form of writing. Ferri emphasises the importance of the seriality, and singles out the three key elements constituting a *romanzo giudiziario* – crime, investigation, solution – thus crystallising the constitutive features of what would be soon called the *giallo*:

la polizia che scopre un grave delitto e un agente, più astuto degli altri, che non si accontenta delle prime e più verosimili apparenze, ma con un indovinato lavoro di induzione e di critica degli indizi iniziali, indica e prosegue un filone di ricerche meno ossequenti alla facile, ma ingannatrice verosimiglianza, per proseguirle nei meati più tortuosi e non facili della verità, alla fine dei quali sta la scoperta del reo.<sup>56</sup>

By underlining the centrality of concepts such as 'inductive reasoning' and 'analysis of clues', Ferri sets forth a view of the genre that subsequently found numerous followers. The idea of the *romanzo giudiziario* as a game played by two clever characters – the villain in Gaboriau's novel 'fa artistico ed emozionante contrasto colla logica lucida ma

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

sfortunata del signor Lecoq' – lies at the centre of Foucault's idea about the birth and social function of the detective story, within whose development the French writer played a major role.<sup>57</sup> According to Foucault, whilst previously the conflict between the delinquent and the law had embedded a tangible class struggle, afterwards it was transformed into a fight between two clever bourgeois individuals, both at their highest level of ingenuity: the cunning criminal on one hand, and the scientific detective on the other.<sup>58</sup> Although, as we shall see throughout this work, the transition from a model of torture and confession to one of cerebral detection is reductive, Ferri's clear and precise interpretation of the genre is strong evidence of the emergence, at the *fin-de-siècle*, of a completely new perception of crime writing.

The potential of Ferri's analysis was further explored at the beginning of the twentieth century by another disciple of Lombroso, Alfredo Niceforo, whose interests ranged from the dynamics and the formation of public opinion to the mechanisms regulating the literary production.<sup>59</sup> Following in the footsteps of Ferri, Niceforo extensively delves into the *romanzo giudiziario*, which he calls 'letteratura rossa', in the articles 'Il detective scientifico nella produzione romanzesca' (1906) and 'Le roman policier' (1910), and in the book *Parigi. Una città rinnovata* (1911).<sup>60</sup> The criminologist

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> 'By his cunning, his tricks, his sharp-wittedness, the criminal represented in this literature has made himself impervious to suspicion; and the struggle between two pure minds – the murderer and the detective – will constitute the essential form of the confrontation. [...] We have moved from the exposition of the facts or the confession to the slow process of discovery'. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 69.

<sup>59</sup> Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960) was a criminologist, anthropologist, racial thinker, statistician, and one of the key figures of Italian eugenics. He theorised the two Italies, applying statistics to demonstrate the backwardness of Southern Italy and the intrinsic difference between Italians from the North and from the South in *Italiani del Nord e Italiani del Sud* (Florence: Tip. Cooperativa, 1899). Drawing on Lombrosian theory, he also categorised different social classes and different types of readership according to biological and anthropological features. He equated savages with the lower class on the basis of similar physical and psychological defects. See Alfredo Niceforo, *Les classes pauvres. Recherches Anthropologiques et Sociales* (Paris: Giard & Brière, 1905), pp. 3-4.

<sup>60</sup> Alfredo Niceforo, 'Il detective scientifico nella produzione romanzesca', *Il piccolo della sera*, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1906; Alfredo Niceforo, 'Le roman policier', *La Revue*, 8 (1910), 433-49.

complains that the recent explosion of texts of crime and detection written by popular writers and vulgar imitators of major novelists has reduced the intellectual appeal of the genre, which has progressively become a product of low value primarily consumed by the lower classes:

la rapida moltiplicazione delle imitazioni non costituisce che una contraffazione spregevole. Eppure è una contraffazione che ha trionfato. E che trionferà ancora per lungo tempo facendo ardere della più viva luce la fiamma di primitiva barbarie che arde – più o meno nascosta – nel cuore degli uomini appartenenti alle più basse stratificazioni sociali. La letteratura rossa, infatti, è oggi diventata la letteratura del popolo; tra il popolo ha solennemente trionfato.<sup>61</sup>

In so doing, Niceforo reinstates the idea of popular forms of crime fiction as ‘letteratura da primitivi’, whose target readership resides ‘nelle basse classi sociali’ but can negatively affect the higher classes.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, though, Niceforo recognises the original literary value of the genre, whose distinctive narrative techniques and conventions were envisaged by Poe, subsequently established by Gaboriau, and finally crystallised and popularised by Conan Doyle:

Il Gaboriau aveva creato con la figura leggendaria di Monsieur Lecoq, il romanzo giudiziario. Più tardi, resuscitando Monsieur Lecoq che sembrava

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<sup>61</sup> Niceforo, *Parigi. Una città rinnovata*, p. 231.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 232, 238. ‘Il popolo si è innamorato della letteratura rossa, e per contraccolpo anche le classi superiori ne hanno subito la suggestione’. Ibid., p. 237.



essere morto, Conan Doyle creò un genere di romanzo giudiziario più moderno e più sorprendente.<sup>63</sup>

It is precisely the creator of Sherlock Holmes, whose adventures had achieved resounding success on the pages of the magazine *La domenica del Corriere*, that Niceforo identifies as the perfect exponent of the modern detective story. Holmes' rational and scientific methods of investigation, which include footprint analyses and anthropometric measurements, are seen as the most effective vehicle for the popularisation and the legitimisation of the most recent scientific outcomes.<sup>64</sup> For Niceforo, after all, 'la scienza è pur sempre più meravigliosa del romanzo'.<sup>65</sup>

Between 1917 and 1937, Niceforo returns several times to the exploration of the detective story in a series of articles aimed to a general public that attempt to historicise the formation of the genre and to trace its genealogy from its origins to the early twentieth century.<sup>66</sup> In order to construct the canon of the detective story Niceforo combines a theoretical approach bringing to light the constitutive features of the genre, from its intellectual component to the centrality of the investigator, with a historical approach that helps him to single out the precursors in past literature. In 'Lontani e lontanissimi precursori del romanzo giudiziario moderno' (1917), Niceforo mentions Quintilian and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 230. 'Il Gaboriau, il Conan Doyle e i cento anonimi creatori della letteratura di sangue, hanno preso le loro ispirazioni dal *Doppio assassinio di via della Morgue*, della *Lettera rubata* e dallo *Scarabeo d'oro* di Edgardo Poe', Niceforo, *Parigi. Una città rinnovata*, pp. 266-7.

<sup>64</sup> 'Leggevo l'altro giorno uno dei romanzi più suggestivi che mai in questi ultimi tempi si siano scritti: *Un dramma misterioso* del Conan Doyle, e ammiravo con quale luminoso effetto il signor Sherlock Holmes faceva l'ispezione del luogo del delitto', Niceforo, *Parigi. Una città rinnovata*, p. 269.

<sup>65</sup> Niceforo, *Parigi. Una città rinnovata*, p. 269.

<sup>66</sup> Alfredo Niceforo, 'Lontani e lontanissimi precursori del romanzo giudiziario moderno', *Il Secolo XX*, March 10<sup>th</sup> 1917, 767-72; Alfredo Niceforo, 'L'istruttoria giudiziaria nell'arte e nella scienza', *Conferenze e prolusioni*, 15 (1922), 241-48; Alfredo Niceforo, 'L'istruttoria giudiziaria nel romanzo e nella scienza', *La giustizia penale*, 43 (1937), 1-9; 94-101; 232-44; 331-342.

his disciples, the protagonist of a tale from the medieval collection *Il Novellino*, and Voltaire's *Zadig*, whose investigative technique bears strong resemblance to Sherlock Holmes.<sup>67</sup> The emphasis on the detective and the scientific methods to identify criminals is reiterated in 'L'istruttoria giudiziaria nell'arte e nella scienza' (1922), in which Niceforo classifies the detective novel according to tangible typologies of sleuth, from the logical thinker (Poe's Dupin) to the cunning investigator (Vidocq, Balzac's Vautrin) and the scientific detective (Gaboriau's Lecoq). The latter constitutes the kind of sleuth 'che più si accosta alla nostra tecnica, ai nostri metodi di ricerca, e sembra quasi, in alcuni punti, precorrerla'.<sup>68</sup>

Interestingly, Niceforo participates in a process of canonisation of the detective fiction genre that was simultaneously taking place in Great Britain, the United States, and Germany.<sup>69</sup> In this period, labels such as detective story, mystery story, and *detektivroman*, began to circulate as critical terms that defined a precise literary genre. Unlike in the Anglo-American world, where renowned novelists such as Carolyn Wells, Dorothy L. Sayers, and S.S. Van Dine directly intervened in the debate through the publication of critical essays and sets of prescribed conventions, and in Germany, in which it was cultural critics, editors, librarians, educators, and authors of other genres who tended to weigh in, in Italy the process of canonisation of the detective story depended to a large degree from the work of outsiders. Niceforo's aim, though, was

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<sup>67</sup> 'lo *Zadig* di Voltaire esamina le tracce, deduce e induce, piuttosto in grazia alle proprie eccezionali qualità che ricorrendo a tecniche speciali. Si senta in che modo procede la narrazione di Voltaire e si converrà che sembra di udire la narrazione delle gesta di Sherlock Holmes stesso', Niceforo, 'Lontani e lontanissimi precursori del romanzo giudiziario moderno', p. 768

<sup>68</sup> Niceforo, 'L'istruttoria giudiziaria nell'arte e nella scienza', p. 245.

<sup>69</sup> In order to have a clear idea of the processes of canonisation of the detective novel in the Anglo-American world and Germany see: Maurizio Ascari, 'From Enigmas to Emotions: The Twentieth Century Canonization of Crime Fiction', in *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 31. 2 (2013) pp. 9-19; Julia Karolle-Berg, 'On the Popularity of the *Kriminalroman*: The Reception, Production, and Consumption of German Crime and Detective Novels (1919-1933)', *Faculty Bibliography*, 66 (2018), <<https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12077>> [accessed 4 January 2019].

inevitably completely different from that of his American, British, and German counterparts. He sought to ennoble the detective story and make it a respectable and appropriate literary form for middle-class audiences because he perceived it as the kind of writing that most perfectly translated into narrative the scientific interest in the identification of criminals through empirical methods. The process of canonisation must thus be analysed within the socio-political context of early-twentieth century Italy, which was experiencing a major process of reorganisation of the police forces on account of the work of Salvatore Ottolenghi and other criminologists, including Niceforo himself.<sup>70</sup> Ottolenghi, a fervent Lombrosian, founded the first Italian police school in 1902 in order to 'scientificize' the criminal investigation as had already happened both in France, with the system of criminal measurement established by Alphonse Bertillon, and in Great Britain, where Francis Galton was working in the areas of composite photography and fingerprint identification.<sup>71</sup> Niceforo's operation betrays the growing awareness of the governing élite in regard to the ideological and socio-cultural impact of crime and detective fiction on the Italian readership. While nineteenth-century attempts by Lombroso and Sighele to deheroicise the figure of the criminal served to popularise and support the new criminological theories, the twentieth-century focus on the scientific detective in the literary imaginary helped to corroborate the scientific redefinition of the police system:

poiché si è venuto intanto, creando, proprio nell'ultimo decennio, un ramo nuovo ed autonomo della criminologia, che va sotto il nome di *inchiesta*

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<sup>70</sup> Salvatore Ottolenghi, *Polizia scientifica* (Roma: Società Poligrafica editrice, 1907); Alfredo Niceforo, *La police et l'enquête judiciaire scientifique* (Paris: Librairie Universelle, 1907).

<sup>71</sup> Alphonse Bertillon, *Identification anthropométrique, instructions signalétiques* (Melun: Imprimerie administrative, 1893); Francis Galton, 'Composite Portraits', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 8 (1878), 132-42; *Fingerprints* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892).

*giudiziaria scientifica*, e mira, dirò così, a creare una istruttoria giudiziaria scientifica, è naturale che vi sia stato qualcuno che abbia ricercato se vi fossero o no punti di contatto tra la nuova scienza e il modo con cui aveva trattato tale materia il ‘romanzo giudiziario’. Il tipo cioè, del giudice istruttore, quale oggi dalla nuova scienza è stato creato, si avvicina, o meno, a quel tipo meraviglioso e fantastico, che l’accesa fantasia dei romanzieri si era compiaciuta a descrivere e a far girare.<sup>72</sup>

Notwithstanding the different aims, critics, writers, and scientists from different countries sought to construct the canon of the detective story by means of similar approaches. They all stress the rational, intellectual components of the genre in order to keep it separated from other popular literary forms associated with bodily sensations, supernatural, horror, and melodrama such as the Gothic novel, sensation fiction, and the ghost-story. The emphasis on the intellectual satisfaction that this narrative form offered to sophisticated readers, as Maurizio Ascari notes, was placed in opposition to the thirst for emotions and corporeal sensations of uncultured readers that, in accordance with nineteenth-century constructions of sensationalism, was conducive to addiction.<sup>73</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, many Italian publishing houses contributed to solidifying this very idea of the detective genre. In order to capture a popular audience, they inaugurated various series specifically devoted to the detective story, including the Milanese publisher Sonzogno with ‘I romanzi polizieschi’ (1914-1924), ‘I racconti misteriosi’ (1919-1924), and ‘Il romanziere poliziesco’ (1921-24), and Varietas with the series ‘Il romanzo poliziesco’ (1921-2). The first series ushered in by Sonzogno, which

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<sup>72</sup> Niceforo, ‘Lontani e lontanissimi precursori del romanzo giudiziario moderno’, p. 767.

<sup>73</sup> Ascari, ‘From Enigmas to Emotions: The Twentieth Century Canonization of Crime Fiction’, p. 9.

exclusively contains translations of French novels, is remarkable for its attempt to define the detective story and provide it with literary independence. This is evident from the very start of this editorial enterprise. In the back cover of the first book of the series, George Meirs' *Il cadavere assassino* (1914), originally published in French in 1912 as *Le cadavre assassin*, Sonzogno specifies that he intended to publish internationally renowned detective stories characterised by a close relation to real life. He promises to spare his readers 'le solite fantastiche fole e inverosimili imitazionali' and to give them 'vere pagine di vita vissuta, di avventure reali, palpitanti, emozionanti, con svolgimento logico, evidente, completo'.<sup>74</sup> The emphasis on the linearity of the detective story and its logical, intellectual nature testifies to the attempt to provide the genre with a clearer, more autonomous literary status. The enormous success of the series 'I libri gialli', launched by Mondadori in 1929, was principally attributable to the publication of those Anglo-American authors, including S.S. Van Dine and Edmund Bentley, who largely contributed to the shaping and construction, from both the textual and critical points of view, of the rational detective story: as Loris Rambelli points out, Mondadori 'poté escludere con sicurezza dalla sua raccolta tutto ciò che non rientrava nel genere poliziesco, intendendo per genere poliziesco quello che si era venuto definendo in area anglosassone verso la fine degli anni Venti'.<sup>75</sup> Aldo Sorani, who translated for Mondadori Ann Katharine Green's famous novel *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), which appeared in 1929 as *Il mistero delle due cugine*, remarks in a 1930 article called 'Conan Doyle e la fortuna del romanzo poliziesco' that the real interest of a *giallo* lies in the 'procedimenti e [...] metodi investigativi usati alla ricerca del misterioso colpevole', and insists that 'il vero e proprio romanzo poliziesco non deve essere confuso col romanzo d'avventure

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<sup>74</sup> George Meirs, *Il cadavere assassino*, trans. by Pio Trucco (Milan: Sonzogno, 1914).

<sup>75</sup> Rambelli, *Storia del giallo italiano*, p. 23.

sanguinarie e terrificanti, non accentrato intorno ad un problema giudiziario o criminologico in genere'.<sup>76</sup>

By the early 1930s, then, the *giallo* was recognised as a formally codified, generally respectable yet exclusively imported literary genre. Except for the isolated case of D'Annunzio, the nineteenth-century reception of crime fiction has revealed a surprising lack of interest towards Italian writers. In addition, the numerous Italian stories featuring detective figures that were published in the first half of the twentieth century in newspapers and journals found no space on the pages of both critics and criminologists. This not simply confirms the markedly anti-popular character of Italian literary criticism, but more importantly reveals the complex and contradictory way in which critical receptions shaped the production of crime texts. Although it is true that Italian crime fiction developed in continuous interaction with criminology, thriving on the debates that sparked within the scientific community, the present work will show how such literature did not entirely accept the purely deterministic implications of positivist criminology, manipulating its most controversial outcomes, and hybridising different approaches to crime and punishment. Furthermore, as we shall see in chapter five, Italian crime fiction was largely influenced by positivist criminologists' fascination with the occult and their incursions into the terrain of psychical research. Such literature thus appeared as a galaxy of intertwining and interconnected literary forms, a coalescence of modernity and Gothicism, in which detective, sensational, and supernatural elements coexist.

The acts of cross-fertilisation that these generic contact zones engendered, though, were perceived as unorthodox and deviant and were inevitably marginalised by criminologists and critics throughout the twentieth century. Ultimately, this gulf between

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<sup>76</sup> Aldo Sorani, 'Conan Doyle e la fortuna del romanzo poliziesco', quoted in Rambelli, *Storia del giallo italiano*, p. 25.

generic production and generic reception must be understood as a conflict between the different demands of popular and critical audiences, but also as the implicit refute of writers to accept the moral and ethical responsibilities with which they were invested by the ruling class. Crime writing was regarded as a threat to political and social order precisely because it resisted systematic theorisation and circulated through mainstream and popular literature as a particular means of exposing the ideological reality of contemporary society and the frail character of the new-born state.

The restrictive view that Italian literary criticism displayed in regard to crime narratives, coupled with its anti-sensational and anti-popular stance, have profoundly influenced the reception of the genre in the Italian cultural and literary establishments until today. Through the accentuation of the discontinuity between crime and detective fiction, the *giallo* has been progressively understood as an impermeable, circumscribed, and rigidly codified genre that exclusively rests on detection.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the enormous attention devoted to foreign authors at the expense of home-grown writers reinforced the feeling that specifically Italian manifestations of the genre simply never existed. Antonio Gramsci, fascinated by the wide appeal of such literature, which he thought could be a powerful meeting ground for intellectuals and the masses, was perplexed by the lack of Italian detective stories, and commented that ‘neanche il romanzo poliziesco, che ha avuto tanta fortuna internazionale [...] ha avuto scrittori in Italia’.<sup>78</sup> It is emblematic that writer Alessandro Varaldo, acknowledging the absence of Italian *gialli*, asks polemically in 1932, ‘non vi sembrerebbe ottima cosa che anche i nostri scrittori, specialmente quelli che trattano un certo genere di moda, parlassero un po’ d’Italia?’.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Rambelli, *Storia del giallo italiano*, pp. 27, 123; Petronio, *Sulle tracce del giallo*, p. 75.

<sup>78</sup> Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, p. 131.

<sup>79</sup> Alessandro Varaldo, ‘Dramma e romanzo poliziesco’, *Comoedia*, 14. 5 (1932), p. 10

## Conclusion

The reception of crime and detective fiction between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries constitutes a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. Nineteenth-century critics were not particularly concerned with the utilisation of crime elements by major novelists, while jurists, criminologists, and scientists in general reacted ambiguously. They either criticised the works of contemporary authors such as Zola and D'Annunzio or exploited them to promote and legitimise their scientific theories. On the contrary, the reception of popular forms of crime writing, including serialised novels and short-stories published in newspapers and magazines, was overtly unfavourable.

The equation of popular crime fiction with lower forms of writing and with an uncultivated readership implies the presence of a common thread that links the reception of such literature to that of broadsheets and broadsides throughout the early-modern period.<sup>80</sup> The main purpose of these publications, which mostly circulated in concomitance with public executions, was to present moral warnings in an entertaining and spectacular way. As Foucault argues, although broadsheets and broadsides were supposed to have the effect of an ideological control, warning against the terrible consequences of delinquency, the actual effect of this literature was equivocal, transforming the criminal into a sort of hero, and was eventually suppressed.<sup>81</sup> Such

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<sup>80</sup> Alberto Natale, *Gli specchi della paura: il sensazionale e il prodigioso nella letteratura di consumo (secoli XVII-XVIII)* (Rome: Carocci, 2008), p. 20. See also *Il delitto narrato al popolo. Immagini di giustizia e stereotipi di criminalità in età moderna*, ed. by Roberto De Romanis and Rosamaria Loretelli (Palermo: Sellerio, 1999).

<sup>81</sup> 'If the condemned man was shown to be repentant, accepting the verdict, asking both God and man for forgiveness for his crimes, it was as if he had come through some process of purification: he died, in his own way, like a saint. But indomitability was an alternative claim to greatness: by not giving in under torture, he gave proof of a strength that no power had succeeded in bending'. The glorification of the figure of the criminal, within whom glory and abomination coexisted, was gradually realised by the government, and 'that was why the reformers of the penal system were soon demanding suppression of these broadsheets'. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 67-8.



obsession towards crime literature thus continued to permeate Italian culture throughout the nineteenth century and well into the Fascist era.

At the same time, thanks particularly to the work of positivist criminologists such as Enrico Ferri and Alfredo Niceforo, as well as the effort of publishers such as Sonzogno and Mondadori, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence and gradual codification of a different genre, the detective story, which privileged the investigator at the expense of the criminal and, by presenting intriguing mysteries that have to be rationally solved, was capable of stimulating the intellectual capacities of a cultivated readership.<sup>82</sup>

As we shall see throughout this thesis, the relationship between critical reception and literary production was far from linear and unproblematic. It is precisely the popular, heterogeneous, unsystematic, and confrontational character of early Italian crime fiction that has contributed to its consistent belittlement in the early twentieth century and the subsequent marginalisation in contemporary critical literature. In order to reassess the development of the form, it is crucial to bring to light its often obfuscated complexity.

As we have seen in this chapter, in the years following the unification there was a widespread preoccupation with the power of the uncivilised, lower classes to infect society with their dangerous taste and morals. In the modern city, where the growing slums were increasingly identified as sites of criminality and cultural and moral degeneration, and where the proximity between diverse social classes became a dangerous reality, the fear of contagion reached its peak. Accordingly, the next chapter looks at how the city-crime nexus is imagined and articulated in Italian crime fiction

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<sup>82</sup> This is not to say that the detective story was entirely accepted by scholars and intellectuals. In the 1930s, as Jane Dunnet observes, although detective novels enjoyed a massive following amongst readers, they encountered some critical resistance, at times even hostility: ‘regarded as products of low cultural value, they were seen by some as an assault [...] on the very idea of literature as art’. Jane Dunnet, ‘The Emergence of a New Literary Genre in Interwar Italy’, in *Italian Crime Fiction*, pp. 6-26 (p. 6).

through the representation of the growing metropolis as a Gothic body with a frighteningly real propensity for physical disease leading to moral and social disorder.

## Chapter 2. DARKEST ITALY

In the aftermath of the unification, the myth of the *Risorgimento* contrasted with the realities of poverty, political unrest, and social tension displayed by a still fragmented country, in which extremely diverse regions had been integrated with difficulty into a single political entity. By the 1870s, patriotism had started to decline and the social question – how to address the problems of poverty and social conflict – began to figure prominently in the political agenda of official administrators, whose attempt to unify and centralise governance had proven problematic. A major issue was represented by violent crime, which the Italian ruling class, as Paul Garfinkel points out, considered ‘the defining feature of Italian lawlessness, if not the country’s “incontestable” primacy in comparison with “civilized” Europe’.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of criminality, particularly in the forms of brigandage and organised crime, was urgent in the South of Italy, including in the Neapolitan regions, further troubled by economic mismanagement and widespread illness with repeated cholera epidemics. In the search for ways to account for those complicated and often underdeveloped areas of the state in which percentages of violent crimes were higher, Italian leaders relied heavily on the racial explanations provided by positivist criminologists and sociologists. The notion of race was in fact fundamental to the etiology of crime in Southern Italy, with positivist criminologists postulating that its populations were closer to animals than to civilised humans on the ladder of evolution.<sup>2</sup> Mostly

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<sup>1</sup> Garfinkel, *Criminal Law in Liberal and Fascist Italy*, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> See Alisa S. Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911. Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 48. The statistics on homicides proposed by criminologists and sociologists exhibited a clear geographical pattern: the data for 1866, for instance, showed the Kingdom divided into two distinct parts, as in the South the homicide rate was almost five times higher than in the North. See Silvana Patriarca, ‘How Many Italies? Representing the South in Official Statistics’, in *Italy’s Southern Question: Orientalism in One Country*, ed. by Jane Schneider (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), pp. 77-97 (p. 85).

coming from the North, exponents of the ruling class attempted to have Italy included within the larger imperialist, industrial, Europe by identifying the country's weakness precisely in the remote South, a place less civilised and thus further from the European core.<sup>3</sup>

The enormous importance of the Southern Question must not obfuscate the fact that, after the unification, more developed northern cities such as Florence and Milan appeared equally problematic and turbulent. Early processes of industrialisation, together with population growth and migration from rural areas had impoverished their city-centres and had transformed them into a prolific breeding ground for the criminal but also the mass of people who could not earn their living, which were differently classified as deserving poor – those who could not work at all, and needed charitable assistance – and undeserving poor, namely vagrants, prostitutes, robbers, and beggars, who were prosecuted under the criminal code of the unified country.<sup>4</sup> The proximity and frequent interaction between delinquents and indigents within the poorest districts of the city became an increasing concern for the government, and generated a vast number of discussions and theorisations about the potential perilousness of such a great multitude of

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<sup>3</sup> The so-called Southern Question originally emerged during the revolutions of 1848 and reached its peak between 1874 and 1884, when the enormous disparity in terms of socio-political development between the South of Italy and the rest of the peninsula dramatically increased. The results of the famous November 1874 general election, in which southern voters, unlike those in most regions of the Centre-North, dealt a major blow to the Right, the party of Cavour and the Moderates that had governed the nation since its inception, was largely interpreted in specifically regional terms, and the heat of political conflict served to animate expressions of southern difference. For an overview of the Southern Question see *Italy's Southern Question: Orientalism in One Country*; John Dickie, *Darkest Italy. The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Salvatore Di Maria, *Towards a Unified Italy: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Perspectives on the Southern Question* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> After 1859 and until 1889, the Piedmontese criminal code applied everywhere in Italy with the exception of Tuscany. Article 450 of the Piedmontese code of 1839 specified three to six months in prison for vagrancy. See Flavio Verona, *Oziosi e vagabondi nella legislazione penale dell'Italia liberale* (Pisa: ETS, 1984), p. 8; Davis, *Conflict and Control*, pp. 219-20

subversives, which came to be known as the ‘dangerous classes’.<sup>5</sup>

The relation between poverty and criminality was framed as nearly mutual. According to the criminologist Raffaele Garofalo, poverty makes the organism vulnerable to degenerative disorders and flaws, which likely passes to the next generation.<sup>6</sup> In his widely read book on the dangerous classes in Italy, the provincial police chief of Bologna Giovanni Bolis posits a direct connection between the concepts of indigence, inactivity, and criminal behaviour: ‘le classi povere e inoperose [...] furono sempre e saranno il semenzajo più produttivo di tutte le specie di malfattori, essendochè il delitto diventa per esse quasi una necessità di esistenza’.<sup>7</sup> According to Bolis, where work fails, there comes indigence, and, as a direct consequence, crime. Police inspector Paolo Locatelli similarly observes that although ‘la tendenza all’oziosità e al vagabondaggio [...] non è istintiva come la tendenza al delinquere’ there is the ‘assoluta certezza che l’ozioso e il vagabondo, non provveduto di rendite di qualsiasi natura, è costretto a ricorrere al delitto [...] per sopperire ai suoi bisogni più stringenti e primitivi’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Original discussions on the dangerous classes appeared in France and Great Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century, when journalists, novelists, travellers, and reformers such as Antoine Frègier (*Les classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes*, Bruxelles: Meline, Cans et Compagnie, 1840), Thomas Beames (*The Rookeries of London. Past, Present and Prospective*, London: Thomas Bosworth, 1850), and Henry Mayhew (*London Labour and the London Poor*, London: 1851) started writing analytically about the lower classes and the underworld, identifying the inequalities that generated a hopelessly marginalised and self-replicating underclass and explaining why it produced crime. In Italy, theorisations on the dangerous classes began in the early 1870s. See Giovanni Bolis, *La polizia e le classi pericolose della società* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1871); Giorgio Curcio, *Delle persone sospette in Italia* (Milan: Tip. ed. Lombarda, 1874); Paolo Locatelli, *Sorveglianti e sorvegliati. Appunti di fisiologia sociale presi dal vero* (Milan: Brigola, 1876), *Miseria e beneficenza. Ricordi di un funzionario di pubblica sicurezza* (Milan: Dumolard, 1878); Giuseppe Alongi, *La mafia nei suoi fattori e nelle sue manifestazioni: studio sulle classi pericolose della Sicilia* (Turin: Bocca, 1887), *Polizia e delinquenza in Italia* (Rome: Cecchini, 1887).

<sup>6</sup> Raffaele Garofalo, *Criminologia* [1885] (Turin: Bocca, 1891), p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Bolis, *La polizia e le classi pericolose della società*, p. 460.

<sup>8</sup> Locatelli, *Sorveglianti e sorvegliati. Appunti di fisiologia sociale presi dal vero*, pp. 103, 101. Police delegate Giuseppe Alongi reiterated this concept and asserted that within this ‘specie pericolosa [...] si trovano i malfattori più incorreggibili’. Alongi, *Polizia e delinquenza in Italia*, pp. 68-9.

According to theorists, this vicious, corrupt, and inherently criminal population that roams the underbelly of the modern city is fundamentally different from normative, working citizens. The exclusive impermeability of these classes, which possess their own language, customs, and traditions, is attributable to hereditary factors that allow their constant reproduction.<sup>9</sup> The ambiguous notion of race, then, was once again utilised to explain, in this case, class difference. As Daniel Pick remarks, Lombroso's equation of degeneration with atavism reduced the problem to backwardness and provided a convincing explanation as to why some people violated norms, while normal, responsible citizens did not.<sup>10</sup> Positivist criminology put official surveys and statistics to work in support of an evolutionary and racialised paradigm that defines these classes as truly other, excluded from the benefits of civilisation, and immersed into a realm of moral degradation that inevitably leads to criminality. For them, the civilised world appeared on the point of being overrun by primitive forces. Certain areas of the city, precisely as the regions of the South, were seen as a foreign country, unredeemed by civilisation, populated by degenerate savages which represented a threatening antithesis to Italian national character.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, all-encompassing labels such as 'dangerous classes' and 'suspicious individuals' were widely used to group perpetrators of very different unlawful acts that frequently occurred in cities such as murders, vagrancy, larceny, and political violations,

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<sup>9</sup> 'Questo gruppo sociale viene identificato col termine classe ma anche, significativamente, col termine casta, utile a sottolineare il carattere di impermeabilità ed ereditarietà'. Francesco Benigno, 'Ripensare le "classi pericolose" italiane: letteratura, politica e crimine nel XIX secolo', in *Questione criminale e identità nazionale in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, ed. by Luigi Lacchè and Monica Stronati (Macerata: EUM, 2014), pp. 57-77 (p. 62).

<sup>10</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> In his treatise on idlers, the politician and social thinker Dino Carina (1836-1872) underlines the dismal effects of Italy's subjugation to foreign powers. As a result of long periods of domination by outsiders, Italians lacked a work ethic and a sense of civic responsibility. In order to achieve freedom and economic prosperity, they have to develop the fortitude to embrace work as a value. Dino Carina, *Dell'ozio in Italia* (Lucca: Canovetti, 1870), p. 14.

that were treated as all alike and as caused by the one kind of deviance.<sup>12</sup> The new enemies of the state, then, which were perceived as responsible for the country's socio-political weakness, were identified within a complex range of people that included criminals but also prostitutes, brigands, anarchists, idlers, vagrants, and beggars. Their backwardness constituted a menace to the process of construction of the state and the creation of a homogenous, normal population.

The racialisation of the lower classes was not, of course, unanimously accepted within the Italian cultural establishment. The principal opponents of the positivist doctrine on race and crime were the sociologists, intellectuals, and socialists Napoleone Colajanni and Filippo Turati.<sup>13</sup> The supposed inferiority of the lower classes and their more accentuated tendency to transgress the law, the two argued, derived not from an arrested development or an atavistic regression but rather from the dreadful socio-economic conditions in which they were forced to live. These different positions generated several debates that progressively shaped the way in which the social question was addressed and negotiated. Criminologists and sociologists influenced one another, and boundaries became blurred. The political economist Achille Loria, for example,

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<sup>12</sup> As Pick explains, Lombroso's social evolutionary model brought all the many contradictory social processes together into an apparent discursive unity: crime, hysteria, superstition, parasitism, insanity, atavism, prostitution, crowds, peasantry, and brigands became the circulating figures of disorder in a language which sought altogether to stave off metaphor. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 115. Biological factors gained favour as the source of what the experts labelled as professional or habitual vagrancy. According to most theorists, vagrants regressed to a more primitive, nomadic state, and there were striking similarities with other forms of socially aberrant behaviour, including, obviously, criminality. See Susan A. Ashley, "Misfits" in the *Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy. Anatomies of Difference* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 114, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Filippo Turati (1857-1932) was a sociologist, criminologist, and one of the instrumental intellectuals in the founding of the Italian Socialist Party in 1892. In the essay 'Appunti sulla questione penale' which appeared on the pages of *La plebe* in 1882, Filippo Turati asserts that the primary cause of delinquency must be found 'nel disordine degli istituti sociali, nella sperequazione delle proprietà, nell'antagonismo delle classi, nell'ineducazione e nello sfruttamento dei ceti inferiori'. The quote can be found in Frigessi, *Cesare Lombroso*, p. 239. Napoleone Colajanni (1847-1921) was a criminologist and sociologist. He was arguably the most ardent critic of the Lombrosian school, as well as one of Italy's leading theoretical writers on socialism.

embraces different viewpoints, affirming that unhealthy living conditions, bad food, alcohol, and poverty inevitably lead to a profound degradation progressively worsening with each generation.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, a positivist like Enrico Ferri was one of the first to include social conditions such as poverty, alcoholism, and unemployment in the production of crime along with the individual's inherited biological and psychological make-up.<sup>15</sup>

Discourses around the characteristics, recognisability, and potential dangerousness of the underclasses engendered an unprecedented response in the literary field, with many writers who eagerly intervened in the debate. Accordingly, this chapter looks at how post-unification Italian literature relates to the process of nation-building through the exploration of the city-crime nexus and its implications on the social question. I have singled out portrayals of Milan, Florence, and Naples within a variety of late-nineteenth century texts that, notwithstanding their ideological and aesthetical differences, challenge the ruling ideology, attacking the government for its lack of action to remedy the city's ills, and advance the cause of progressive liberalism. The first section thus draws attention to the socio-political engagement of Italian authors, by delineating the complex yet often ambivalent modalities through which they denounce the dismal effects of a corrupt system upon the poor, who are forced to live side by side with a criminal population in filthy and insanitary housing situated in the underbelly of the city or in the poorly

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<sup>14</sup> Achille Loria, *Le basi economiche della costituzione sociale* [1893] (Turin: Bocca, 1902), p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> 'L'ambiente naturale e sociale, combinato colle tendenze ereditarie ed acquisite individuali e cogli impulsi occasionali, determina necessariamente un relativo contingente di reati'. Enrico Ferri, *I nuovi orizzonti del diritto e della procedura penale* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1881), p. 118. 'L'uomo', Ferri argues, 'è una macchina, nel senso che egli nulla dà nelle sue azioni più di quanto ricava dall'ambiente in cui vive, sia nel fisico che nel morale; esso altro non è, come ogni essere vivente, che una macchina di trasformazione delle forze, soggetta alla legge universale di causalità. [...] Ma non è fatto a macchina, nel senso di meccanismo inorganico, appunto perché esso è un meccanismo vivente, che ha una propria e speciale rispondenza alle cause esterne'. Ferri, *I nuovi orizzonti del diritto e della procedura penale*, p. 14.



constructed neighbourhoods that spring up outside the old city centres.

What marks these texts as distinctive is their attempt to hybridise seemingly incompatible elements such as objectivity, scientific detachment, crude realism, Gothic sensationalism, and melodrama in order to convey a stronger political message. Though the outcome is rather ambiguous. Hence, the second section investigates how the deployment of specific Gothic motifs – the metaphor of the city as labyrinth; the representation of the lower classes in terms of otherness; and the connection between smell and disease – eventually undermines the realistic and polemic character of the texts, while also weakening the authors' political stance.<sup>16</sup> I contend that the ideological framework underlying Italian crime literature's portrayal of low-life comes to paradoxically serve the interests of politics, ambiguously and unwittingly reinforcing the ideas spread by the ruling class, and further marginalising a vast, indiscriminate range of cultural others. Yet at the same time, it can be argued that, by trying to conciliate different, if not opposite, perspectives, and by providing environmental as well as racial explanations of criminal behaviour, Italian writers played a crucial part in shaping later perceptions and theorisations of the dangerous classes. Eventually, I argue, they influenced the early-twentieth-century inquiries of Niceforo on the anthropology of the lower classes, in which the criminologist and statistician pinpoints both race and

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<sup>16</sup> I will largely borrow themes and imagery from the Urban Gothic mode, a literary form in which the Gothic is relocated into those alarming and threatening cities that emerged in the nineteenth century. The term and concept of Urban Gothic is foreshadowed in Fred Botting's widely disseminated *Gothic*, pp. 74-87. The most relevant theorisation of the Urban Gothic is that of Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 27-77; 'Gothic cities', in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 54-62. See also the recent Jamieson Ridenhour, *In Darkest London: The Gothic Cityscape in Victorian Literature* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013). The Urban Gothic perfectly intersects with the territory of crime writing: see Alexander Moudrov, 'Early American Crime Fiction: Origins to Urban Gothic', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, pp. 128-39.

environment as the key factors that determine the diversity between the social classes and their differing inclinations to violate the social norms.

## 2.1 Realism, Polemic, and Fiction

The association between the city and crime represents one of the constitutive features of nineteenth-century crime literature. Outside of Italy, discussions on the dangerous classes dominated throughout the first half of the century, inspiring some of the most famous crime novels of the period, including Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842), whose publication and immediate translations gave rise to an array of adaptations, imitations, and re-writings that have been categorised under the label 'city-mysteries'.<sup>17</sup> Many Italian authors were ready to capitalise on the widespread success of this literary trend, which quickly took hold in Italy, and greatly played on the threatening dimension of the urban environment, constructing a varied low-life topography of urban terrors.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In the early nineteenth-century, capitals such as Paris, London, and New York became the theatres of some of the most famous crime novels of the period, which have fallen under the loose category of 'city-mysteries'. The genre includes novels such as Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) to Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842), Paul Féval's *Les Mystères de Londres* (1843), Eugene Vidocq's *Les Vrais Mystères de Paris* (1844), G.M.W. Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* (1844-8), George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1845), and Edward Zane's *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848). For an overview of the genre see Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992); Stephen Knight, *The Mysteries of the Cities: Urban Crime Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* was translated into Italian in 1843 (Eugène Sue, *I misteri di Parigi*, trans. by Angiolo Orvieto, 9 vols, Livorno: Vannini, 1843) while Féval's *Les Mystères de Londres* and Vidocq's *Les Vrais Mystères de Paris* rapidly appeared as *I misteri di Londra*, 4 vols (trans. by Angiolo Orvieto, Livorno: Vannini, 1844-5) and *I veri misteri parigini*, 3 vols (trans. by Angiolo Orvieto, Florence: Casoni, 1845) respectively. From approximately the late 1840s a massive number of specifically Italian urban mysteries were published. Examples include Felice Govean and Alessandro Borella, *I misteri di Torino scritti da una penna a quattro mani* (Turin: Claudio Perrin Editore, 1849); Carlo Lorenzini, *I misteri di Firenze. Scene sociali* (Florence: Tipografia Fioretti, 1857); Alessandro Sauli, *I misteri di Milano. Storia contemporanea*, 2 vols (Milan: Libreria di Francesco Sanvito succ. alla ditta Borroni e Scotti, 1857-9); Anton Giulio Barrili, *I misteri di Genova. Cronache contemporanee*, 2 vols (Genova: Andrea Moretti, 1867-70).

The literary form of the Italian urban mysteries has been deeply under-theorised and under-studied due to the lack of homogeneity between the texts, their ambivalent ideology, and their fundamental distance from the foreign models.<sup>19</sup> In this chapter, I will take into consideration texts that have occasionally been included in surveys on the Italian mysteries. Nonetheless, my intention is not that of marking borders or creating critical pigeon-holes. Instead, I will endeavour to trace connections between highly different texts mainly published when the genre of the mysteries had already become unfashionable, that is between the early 1860s and the mid 1880s, in concomitance with the beginning of a slow, contested process of state-building that generated new tensions within urban Italy.<sup>20</sup>

This chapter will focus primarily, although not exclusively, on Francesco Mastriani's *I*

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<sup>19</sup> For Enrico Ghidetti, Sue's model was deeply trivialised and essentially deprived of its socio-political quality by Italian writers. According to Quinto Marini, who considers Francesco Mastriani's *I misteri di Napoli* (1869-70) the only clear example of the genre because of its depiction of an opulent, decadent aristocracy and a lowest class of criminals and outcasts, the Italian mysteries remained a literary phenomenon and did not contribute to fomenting political unrest in the same way in which this happened in France, where many of the workers on the barricades were ardent readers of Sue's novels. Brian Moloney and Gillian Ania have subsequently enlarged the canon of Italian mysteries, although they demonstrated that most of them, particularly those published in the 1840s and 1850s when the cities were still largely rural and industrially underdeveloped, are simply love or adventure stories that used the label mysteries in the titles just to maximize sales. These novels rarely focused on problems related to the growth of the city such as over-population and the rise in criminal activity, but mainly 'sulle tensioni dell'unificazione [...] e sul conflitto tra liberali accanitamente anticlericali e ecclesiastici parimenti animati da forti sentimenti antisocialisti'. Ghidetti, 'Per una storia del romanzo popolare in Italia: i 'misteri' di Toscana', p. 97; Quinto Marini, *I 'misteri' d'Italia* (Siena: ETS, 1993), p. 10; Brian Moloney, Gillian Ania, 'Analoghi vituperi: la bibliografia del romanzo dei misteri in Italia', *La bibliofilia*, 106.2 (2004), 173-213 (p. 196).

<sup>20</sup> The exclusion of Rome may surprise. Though, the novels set in Rome, which was formally annexed only in 1870, rarely dedicate attention to the city and its problems. On the one hand, as Maurizio Ascari claims, pre-unification novels such as Bonaiuto Del Vecchio's *I misteri di Roma contemporanea. Romanzo storico-politico* (1851) and Franco Mistrali's *I misteri del Vaticano, o La Roma dei Papi* (1861) appropriated the formula of the city-mysteries as a propaganda tool to convey a pro-unification and pro-liberal political message. On the other hand, post-unification texts such as Pier Francesco Paolo De Dominicis's *I misteri del chiostro romano e la presa di Roma* (1873) and the anonymous *I nuovi misteri della corte di Roma* (1875) became a vehicle to mainly express anti-clerical and anti-papal ideas. See Maurizio Ascari, 'The Mysteries of the Vatican: From Nineteenth-Century Anti-Clerical Propaganda to Dan Brown's Religious Thriller', in *Crime Fiction in the City: Capital Crimes*, ed. by Lucy Andrew and Catherine Phelps (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 107-25 (p. 111); Moloney and Ania, 'Analoghi vituperi: la bibliografia del romanzo dei misteri in Italia', p. 195.

*vermi. Studi storici su le classi pericolose in Napoli* (186-4) and *I misteri di Napoli. Studi storico sociali* (1869-70); Lodovico Corio's *La plebe di Milano* (1876-7), which was published in a single volume as *Milano in ombra. Abissi plebei* (1885); Paolo Valera's *Milano sconosciuta* (1878-9); Giulio Piccini's *Firenze sotterranea* (1884); and Matilde Serao's *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884).<sup>21</sup>

This body of work is neither homogenous nor without internal conflicts. These texts present many dissimilarities, most of which depend on the diverse urban structure of cities such as Naples, Florence, and Milan. Nineteenth-century Naples was one of the most populous and contradictory cities in Europe, marked by utmost wealth and extreme poverty, whose frightening, obscure underbelly closely recalled those of London and Paris. Shortly after the unification, Naples was troubled by a serious emigration problem, gross economic mismanagement, brigandage, organised crime, as well as a grave housing

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<sup>21</sup> Francesco Mastriani (1819-1891) was one of the most prolific Italian popular novelists of the nineteenth century. He undertook medical studies in Naples but turned to literature. His work documents Neapolitan customs and attitudes, and gives a remarkable picture of social structures and conflicts in the city. The novels *I vermi. Studi storico-sociali su le classi pericolose in Napoli* [1863], 5 vols (Naples: Gabriele Regina Editore, 1877) and *I misteri di Napoli* [1869-70], 2 vols (Naples: G. Nobile, 1870) belong to what Antonio Palermo calls Mastriani's 'trilogia socialista', which characterises the second phase of his literary career, extending approximately between the 1860s and 1870s. See Antonio Palermo, *Da Mastriani a Viviani. Per una storia della letteratura a Napoli fra Otto e Novecento* (Naples: Liguori, 1972), p. 110. Matilde Serao (1856-1927) was a journalist, novelist and, more broadly, one of the key figures of Neapolitan culture at the turn of the nineteenth century. *Il ventre di Napoli* (Pisa: ETS, 1995) is the result of a collection of journalistic pieces originally written for the Roman *Capitan Fracassa* paper in 1884. Lodovico Corio (1847-1911) was a historian and journalist mainly remembered for the sociological inquiry *La plebe di Milano*. It appeared in instalments in the journal *La Vita Nuova* between 1876 (issue number 15) to 1877 (issue number 29), and was then published as a single volume in 1885 with the title *Milano in ombra. Abissi plebei* (Milan: Civelli, 1885). I will quote from this edition. Paolo Valera (1850-1926) was an anarchist, journalist, and writer influenced by *verismo*. His *Milano sconosciuta* appeared originally on the pages of *La plebe* in 1878 from the 26<sup>th</sup> of March (no. 12) to the 30<sup>th</sup> of September (no. 38). It was published as a single volume the following year (Milan: Bignami, 1879), and was re-printed with additions in 1898, 1908, and 1922. I will quote from the first edition of 1879. Giulio Piccini (1849-1915) was a journalist and writer who published a variety of novels under the pen name of Jarro. *Firenze sotterranea* (Florence: Mariano Ricci, 1884) collects a series of articles that appeared in the moderate newspaper *La nazione*, and was re-printed in 1885 and 1900. I will quote from the 1900 edition.

problem and class division, which created a situation ripe for social unrest.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, urbanisation without a real growth in industrialisation and the outbreak of repeated cholera epidemics aggravated the social discomfort.

Unlike Naples, Milan and Florence did not possess such a dichotomic character, nor displayed a teeming, dark underbelly. Instead, it was the growing city-centre, witnessing an influx of lower-middle and working classes into urban spaces which had up until that point been the domain of the affluent bourgeoisie, to make the city a source of anxiety and ambivalence for its residents, as well as for journalists, travellers, and writers of fiction. The problem of immigrants, who were both new industrial workers and outcasts from rural areas who did not enjoy stable employment, was perceived as central in Florence. After having undergone an enormous urban renewal when it was the capital of the Kingdom of Italy between 1865 and 1871, Florence was completely neglected by the government when the centre of gravity of the country moved towards Rome, provoking a series of social problems.<sup>23</sup> Immigration constituted a pressing issue in Milan as well, Italy's wealthiest commercial city and the first to become an industrial one towards the end of the century. The pressure of immigration grew significantly over the decades and made a strong and alarming impression on Milanese residents, upsetting an already precarious balance.<sup>24</sup> Although in the decades that followed the unification

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<sup>22</sup> Antonio Ghirelli, *Napoli italiana: storia della città dopo il 1860* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), pp. 17-21.

<sup>23</sup> See Carlo Cresti, Silvano Fei, 'Le vicende del "risanamento" di Mercato Vecchio', *Storia Urbana* 1.1 (1977), 99-126; Silvano Fei, *Firenze 1881-1898: la grande operazione urbanistica* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1977); Rinaldo Luccardini, *Firenze. L'ingrandimento della città nell'Ottocento* (Genoa: Sagep, 2016), pp. 88, 108; Anna Pellegrino, 'Firenze noir. Criminalità e marginalità a Firenze tra Otto e Novecento', *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea*, 21.1 (2015), 1-21.

<sup>24</sup> See Giorgio Bigatti, *La città operosa. Milano nell'Ottocento* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000), p. 143; Lorenzo Del Panta, *Evoluzione demografica e popolamento nell'Italia dell'Ottocento: 1796-1914* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1984). From 1871 to 1890, Milan counted an average of 6,300 new residents every year, both from internal growth and from immigration, the great majority belonging to the second category. Population growth in Milan in the period 1872-1901 was 16

neither the economy nor society underwent any sudden and dramatic changes that resulted in a noticeable and continuous growth in crime, large segments of the community felt increasingly uneasy about law and order, nourishing the collective perception of a strong social crisis.<sup>25</sup>

For Northern cities like Milan and Florence, then, the progressive coalescence between immigrants from rural areas, many of whom had no employment at all, surviving in the end on charity or illegal activities, and urban population increased the already precarious conditions of the centre.<sup>26</sup> For a large part of the community the connection between poverty, moral corruption, and crime became stronger, and both the moderate liberals and the rising bourgeoisie felt increasingly insecure, invoking a tougher policy to curb law-breaking. Ultimately, notwithstanding the differences between these three Italian cities, what links them is the increasing proximity between delinquents and indigents within the poorest districts of the urban fabric and its problematic implications for the moral development of the entire country.

There are, inevitably, many differences also between the writers I have selected, especially in terms of ideology. However, all these texts are, at least in the intentions of the authors, oppositional and challenging. Valera's radically anti-bourgeois and anti-positivist political stance is well-known and it is coherent with its adherence to the movement of the *scapigliatura*, but Mastriani's and Seraos's socialist-humanitarian worldview must not be minimised, because it is translated into works that repeatedly

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per cent due to internal population increase and 84 per cent due to immigration. See Stefano Gallo, *Senza attraversare le frontiere. Le migrazioni interne dall'Unità a oggi* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2012), p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> See Simona Mori, 'The police and the Urban "Dangerous Classes": The Culture and Practice of Public Law and Order in Milan After National Unity', *Urban History*, 43.2 (2016), 266-84 (p. 277).

<sup>26</sup> Bigatti, *La città operosa. Milano nell'Ottocento*, p. 174; Mori, 'The police and the Urban "Dangerous Classes"', p. 279.

polemicalise with the establishment.<sup>27</sup> Although slightly surprising, two convinced bourgeois positivists, and acute observers of urban reality such as Corio and Piccini are equally not reluctant to level a vehement critique to the ruling class, showing a sympathetic attitude for the poor and their atrocious conditions.

In order to analyse these texts together, a first element to consider is their realistic dimension. Italian authors continually assert the actuality of their accounts and in several cases revert to statistics and to newspaper sources for verification.<sup>28</sup> In *I vermi*, a book that illustrates the social and moral decay of Neapolitan society shortly after Italy's unification, plagued by ignorance, dire poverty, and idleness, Mastriani immediately cautions that 'signori, io non iscrivo un romanzo'.<sup>29</sup> Instead, he aims to shed further light on those classes, called 'vermi sociali', that 'si danno a vivere d'illeciti guadagni' roaming the slums of the new metropolis.<sup>30</sup> Through a number of striking real-life case-studies, Valera in his reportage *Milano sconosciuta* equally explores the 'luoghi più orridi e spaventevoli' of Milan without the fear 'di sprofondarci nei bassi fondi sociali per studiare, rovistare, scandagliare nelle più intime latebre quell'elemento cinicamente detto impuro, che galleggia nelle grandi metropoli'.<sup>31</sup> Serao's *Il ventre di Napoli*, which describes the inhabitants of three districts of Naples – Porto, Vicaria and Mercato – just

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<sup>27</sup> Valera takes an anti-bourgeois and prevalently anti-positivist stance, and often reminds his readers of his belonging to the proletariat. 'Ogni qualvolta ci tocca leggere in un giornale o in un libro, che l'autore ha vissuto ai fianchi della plebe, per provare ch'egli è saputo in materia, un fiotto di rabbia ci scappa dal labbro [...]. Bisogna aver vissuto con lei; aver riposato sullo stesso capezzale di granito o di paglia, aver indossato gli stessi cenci [...]. Fuori di questa condizione, non si possono dire sulla 'canaglia' che menzogne, buaggini, asinerie; non si possono scrivere che romanzi'. Paolo Valera, 'Asciata', in *Gli scamiciati. Seguito alla Milano sconosciuta* [1881] (Milan: Lampi ristampa, 2004), pp. III-VIII (pp. III-IV).

<sup>28</sup> In *I vermi*, Mastriani inserts entire journal articles, includes excerpts from the Italian penal code, and relies on statistics when talking about homicides. Mastriani, *I vermi*, II, pp. 22, 149. Corio relies heavily on statistics as well, especially when discussing the problem of prostitution. Corio, *Milano in ombra. Abissi plebei*, pp. 18-29.

<sup>29</sup> Mastriani, *I vermi*, I, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> Francesco Mastriani, 'Prefazione alla prima edizione', in *I vermi*, I, pp. 5-8 (p. 5).

<sup>31</sup> Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, p. 33-4.

after a major epidemic of cholera in the city, constitutes a ‘breve studio di verità e di dolore’ and an ‘opera incompleta di cronista, non di scrittore’ that serves ‘per ricordare a chi deve: non abbandonate Napoli’.<sup>32</sup> In *Firenze sotterranea*, which depicts the degenerated conditions of both the centre and the periphery of Florence in the early 1880s, Piccini claims to have written ‘un documento di storia’, and concludes pointing out that ‘io vi ho detto il vero: ora, voi giudicate!’.<sup>33</sup>

The urban investigations carried out by these writers do not aim to fuel an already tumultuous socio-political climate. Instead, they appropriate realism in service of a larger social reform agenda, in the attempt to raise awareness of the condition of the lower classes and to redress poverty and backwardness. They directly address the effects of class difference on the production of deviance and call for social reforms. Corio in *Milano in ombra* studies the ‘falange plebea’, formed by ‘vagabondi, giuntatori, paltonieri, guidoni, pitocchi, [che] si mescolano insieme’, with a view to find a solution to the many social problems experienced in the city-centre and the periphery of Milan: ‘non scriviamo a provocare la corruzione, ma ad eccitare in chi può e in chi deve il desiderio e la volontà di porre rimedio a questi orrori’.<sup>34</sup> The underclasses, Corio insists, ‘non hanno sentimenti bassi, se non quando si elevano alla borghesia’.<sup>35</sup> Piccini equally sympathises with the poor – ‘io ho imparato ad amare, a compatire, a esaltare chi soffre’, he writes in the preface – while Valera takes a strong anti-authoritarian attitude when he asserts ‘proteggeremo sempre coloro i quali non furono che il bersaglio di leggi che essi non

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<sup>32</sup> Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, p. 63.

<sup>33</sup> Giulio Piccini, ‘Proemio’, in Id., *Firenze sotterranea. Appunti, ricordi, descrizioni, bozzetti* [1884] (Florence: Bemporad, 1900), pp. IX-XXXI (p. XXX). Piccini, *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 201. Florence saw a sudden and invasive urban development as well as the growth of new industrial sectors, particularly engineering, between 1865 and 1871, when it was the capital of the Kingdom of Italy. See Luccardini, *Firenze. L’ingrandimento della città nell’Ottocento*, p. 88.

<sup>34</sup> Corio, *Milano in ombra*, pp. 15, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 6.



hanno mai conosciuto'.<sup>36</sup> In order to remedy the difficult conditions of the deserving poor, Italian authors contend, the government must primarily separate them from actual lawbreakers: 'innanzi a tutto bisogna pensare a separare i poveri, gl'infelici, dai furfanti', remarks Piccini.<sup>37</sup>

The most wretched populations in the city lived in an underworld that was, the authors believed, deliberately and culpably ignored by the upper classes. Piccini, for instance, points the finger to 'coloro che si improvvisano e si dichiarano tutori del consorzio civile' and 'lo spensierato crudele egoismo delle classi, che si dicono da sé, superiori'.<sup>38</sup> Valera critiques those snobbish bourgeois who disparage the lower classes and their 'rozzezza selvaggia', and blames the ruling class for their hopeless social conditions: 'che cosa volete esigere da una plebe cresciuta in mezzo alla prostituzione e al carcere, in mezzo alle turpitudini ed ai digiuni?'.<sup>39</sup> It comes as no surprise that they directly address those tasked with the administration of the state, which are seen as incapable of dealing with the vast array of problems from which the cities were suffering. In *I vermi*, Mastriani repeatedly speaks to the 'autorità competenti' and denounces that 'gli uomini governativi che hanno nelle mani le redini della pubblica amministrazione non iscesero giammai negli antri dove languisce di freddo e di fame la carne umana'.<sup>40</sup> In *Il ventre di Napoli* Serao calls on the Italian Prime Minister Agostino Depretis in the initial invective, launching a forthright attack on the government for its lack of action to fight the devastating cholera epidemic that spread in August 1884: 'voi non lo conoscevate, onorevole Depretis, il ventre di Napoli. Avevate torto, poiché voi siete il governo e il governo deve sapere tutto'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Piccini, 'Proemio', in Id., *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 11; Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, p. 212.

<sup>37</sup> Piccini, *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 190.

<sup>38</sup> Piccini, 'Proemio', in Id., *Firenze sotterranea*, pp. X, XI.

<sup>39</sup> Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, p. 40.

<sup>40</sup> Mastriani, *I vermi*, IV, p. 65, III, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, p. 9.

Notwithstanding the polemic and realistic intentions, there are several contradictions between the writers' objectives and their textual realisation. Italian scholars have principally drawn attention to stylistic aspects. The language employed by Piccini, for instance, has been defined by the linguist Massimo Arcangeli as 'turgida e legnosa [...] irrealistica [...] assurda, ben lontana anche da quella di tanti medi scrittori "realisti" contemporanei', while for Antonio Palermo Mastriani's style borders on the 'antinaturalismo più oltranzoso' and his complicated lexicon – Mastriani utilises different linguistic registers to represent life in diverse social environments – often escapes verisimilitude.<sup>42</sup> Giovanna Rosa has pointed out that, notwithstanding the diametrically opposite narrative strategies adopted by Valera and Corio in their portrayals of Milan, their style ultimately betrays an 'appendicismo melodrammatico' that makes the texts veer towards the territory of the sensation novel.<sup>43</sup>

More generally, the magniloquent, emphatic, and often contrived language that Italian writers adopt serves to stimulate the repulsive reaction of the bourgeois reader. Piccini, for instance, repeatedly underscores that he is narrating 'cose che a me stesso non sarebber parse credibili, se non le avessi vedute!'.<sup>44</sup> A novel like Mastriani's *I misteri di Napoli*, a long reconstruction of Neapolitan society between 1846 and 1862 that vividly

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<sup>42</sup> Massimo Arcangeli, 'Una Firenze non proprio sotterranea. Sulla lingua di Giulio Piccini', in *Giulio Piccini (Jarro) tra Risorgimento e Grande Guerra (1849-1915)*, ed. by Francesco Lucioli (Pisa: ETS, 2016), pp. 67-86 (p. 86); Palermo, *Da Mastriani a Viviani. Per una storia della letteratura a Napoli fra Otto e Novecento*, p. 124.

<sup>43</sup> Giovanna Rosa, *Identità di una metropoli: la letteratura della Milano moderna* (Turin: N. Aragno, 2004), p. 239. Rosa maintains that Valera recurs to the 'coordinate stilistiche tipiche del romanzo d'appendice [...] quanto più la narrazione procede entro gli abissi plebei tanto più il "raccontato" si approssima al "vissuto" e le leggi del metodo oggettivistico sono stravolte dai dettami imperiosi del romanzo popolare'. Giovanna Rosa, *Il mito della capitale morale: letteratura e pubblicistica a Milano fra Otto e Novecento* (Milan: Edizioni di comunità, 1982), p. 66. As to Corio, her comment is equally sharp: 'quanto più Corio ribadisce l'obiettività delle sue osservazioni, perché frutto di testimonianza diretta, tanto più abbandona l'ottica dell'indagine giornalistica per entrare nella dimensione del resoconto romanzesco'. Rosa, *Il mito della capitale morale*, pp. 87-8.

<sup>44</sup> Piccini, *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 36.

conveys the lives of decadent aristocrats, in this case the wealthy family of landowners Massa-Vitelli, as well as underworld criminals and the virtuous poor, emphasises fears and horrors of city-life by making urban reality exceed romance in its terrible actuality. The language is crude and somatic, particularly when horrific effects are deployed in order to convey the horror of living in the city slums.

In all these texts, as we shall see, the dangerous class is portrayed as far more dangerous than the conventional one (which consisted, for the most part, of petty criminals), a class utterly impoverished, de-moralised, alienated, and morally degenerated. It is unsurprising that these authors were criticised at the time for their works, which were sometimes perceived as mere fictional accounts of imaginary threats, narrated in a gratuitously sensationalistic manner. Giuseppe Conti, for instance, the author of *Firenze vecchia. Storia, cronaca aneddotica, costumi: 1799-1859* (1899), another sociological inquiry into the heart of Florence, covertly accuses Piccini of having invented most of his *Firenze sotterranea*: ‘i grandi delitti inventati per fare effetto e far perdere i sonni; le paurose tragedie, i sanguinosi drammi, descritti e raccontati come cose vere e naturali accaduti in quel luogo, salvo rare eccezioni, non sono mai esistiti se non nella fantasia di chi li ha scritti’.<sup>45</sup>

The ambiguous nature of these novels was not merely the result of impassioned participation and lack of realism at the expense of sensationalism. What is interesting is that their supposedly denunciatory and reformatory purpose collides with the textual representations of poverty, crime, the slums and their inhabitants. It is remarkable that, notwithstanding the areas of prosperity and wealth displayed by late-nineteenth century Italian cities such as Naples, Milan, and Florence, the focus of novelists remains firmly

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<sup>45</sup> Giuseppe Conti, *Firenze vecchia. Storia, cronaca aneddotica, costumi: 1799-1859* (Florence: Bemporad, 1899), pp. 438-9.

placed on the depressed conditions of impoverished, dreadful districts that form a breeding ground for delinquents of any kind. Portrayals of the city in nineteenth-century Italian crime fiction seem almost interchangeable with, and nearly always collapse into, representations of low-class spaces.

Italian writers are thus strongly concerned with the developing urbanisation of the modern city, and the Gothic arises largely as an acknowledgment of such disquiet. In the next section, I will explore some of the contact-zones between Gothic modes and late-nineteenth century writing about criminality, the underclasses, the city, and the slums.<sup>46</sup> By depicting the backroom life of inner city districts, made up of storerooms, basement tenements, narrow and winding alleys, secret passages, hidden doorways, subterranean chambers, and small squares, Italian writers plunge the reader into an enclosed, claustrophobic, and ultimately Gothicised fictional space from which it seems impossible to escape.

## 2.2 Labyrinths, Otherness, and Infection

In the Urban Gothic, as Jamieson Ridenhour suggests, ‘the cityscape replaces the classic Gothic edifice, or rather multiplies it’.<sup>47</sup> The labyrinthine nature of the criminal underworld constitutes an obsessive concern in many of these texts. Mastriani utilises the idea of the labyrinth in a figurative sense to render the meandering character of his *I misteri di Napoli*, taking the reader through a ‘labyrinth of facts’, an expression that the

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<sup>46</sup> The works of Francesco Mastriani and Matilde Serao have been investigated through the lens of the Gothic, although the role of the city has never been taken into consideration. See Tommaso Scappaticci, *Tra orrore gotico e impegno sociale: la narrativa di Francesco Mastriani* (Cassino: Garigliano, 1992); Ursula Fanning, *Gender Meets Genre: Woman as Subject in the Fictional Universe of Matilde Serao* (Ballsbridge: Irish Academic Press, 1997); Patrizia Noce Bottoni, *Il romanzo gotico di Francesco Mastriani* (Florence: Cesati, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Ridenhour, *In Darkest London: The Gothic Cityscape in Victorian Literature*, p. 10.

Neapolitan author has most likely borrowed from *The Mysteries of London* (1844-8), where G.W. Reynolds famously wrote that ‘the reader who follows us through the mazes of our narrative has yet to be introduced to many strange places’.<sup>48</sup>

The metaphor of the labyrinth is widely used in nineteenth-century popular fiction to depict Naples and its ‘innumeri arterie, le strade e i vicoli, che l’intersecano in ogni verso’.<sup>49</sup> It is significant that Mastriani, in his early novel *La cieca di Sorrento* (1852), portrays a poor district of Naples as a ‘laberinto d’infiniti viottoli, ronchi e stradelle non più larghe d’un distender di braccia, [...] attraversando le quali si ha sempre una certa sospensione di animo, come quando si visita una carcere o un ospedale’.<sup>50</sup> The parallels between a poor neighbourhood and both the prison and the asylum, which evoke crime and madness but also imply inescapability, are not coincidental. Mastriani uses the metaphor of the labyrinth to introduce the first image of horror of the novel, which consists in the depiction of a young medical student while dismembering a corpse. This scene, which incidentally serves to address the problem of the trade in dead bodies, a plague in nineteenth-century Europe that encouraged many criminals to kill in order to sell the corpses for dissection in medical schools, contributes to the creation of a sinister and markedly Gothic atmosphere: ‘ma cosa fa quell’uomo da costa del tavolo [...] che cosa è gittato su quel tavolo? Cielo! Una testa! Una testa umana! Ed il sangue è tuttavia rappreso sulla parte svelta dal tronco! Ed un coltello è nelle mani di colui!’.<sup>51</sup>

The unhealthy, overcrowded, and densely packed districts of Naples, particularly those suffering from the highest rates of poverty in the city, are at the centre of Serao’s *Il ventre di Napoli*, in which the metaphor of the labyrinth becomes a way of establishing

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<sup>48</sup> Mastriani, *I misteri di Napoli*, II, p. 489; G.W. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* [1844-8] (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> Mastriani, *I misteri di Napoli*, II, p. 206.

<sup>50</sup> Francesco Mastriani, *La cieca di Sorrento*, 2 vols (Naples: Tramater, 1852), I, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 6.

the city as the modern urban equivalent of the Gothic mansion: remote, impenetrable, and dangerous. The irregularity of the alleys, courts, and by-ways is cause for alarm and dismay, and ‘the secrecy of the labyrinth’, as Richard Maxwell points out, always ‘signifies crime’.<sup>52</sup> Serao claims that ‘i napoletani istessi [...] non conoscono *tutti* i quartieri bassi’, hinting at the unfamiliarity, inaccessibility, and unknowability of certain areas of the city, where crime spreads like a wildfire.<sup>53</sup> To describe the old *Via dei Mercanti*, she emphasises its convoluted character and draws on words associated with the idea of the labyrinth: ‘sarà larga quattro metri, tanto che le carrozze non vi possono passare, ed è sinuosa, si torce come un budello’.<sup>54</sup> A small, dark, and gloomy neighbourhood called *Tentella* is vividly portrayed as ‘un intrico quasi verminoso di vicoletti e vicolucci, nerastri, ove la meridiana mai discende, ove mai il sole penetra’.<sup>55</sup> In *Il ventre di Napoli*, the urban landscape appears desolate and disturbing. The slums described here constitute a space suited only for despair, and appear as a modern ruin, atrophied and abandoned, reflecting fears about the future of the city-space and its uncontrollability.

While the slums of Naples seem to be confined, mostly separated from the rest of the city, suggesting that an ordered and knowable city actually exists beyond these circumscribed regions, the Florence of Piccini emerges as even more disturbing. In *Firenze sotterranea* he explores both geographically secluded areas of the city – for instance the famous neighbourhood of *San Frediano*, the ‘quartiere dei ladri, dei

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<sup>52</sup> Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London*, p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, p. 11. Emphasis in the text.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> This passage is taken from the second edition of the book, published in 1906, in which Serao inserts a new chapter in order to show how little the city has improved after the operations of urban renewal that started in 1885. Behind its new façade, the labyrinthine nature of the Neapolitan streets has remained the same. Matilde Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli: vent'anni fa, adesso, l'anima di Napoli* (Naples: Perrella, 1906), p. 108.

malviventi oltr'Arno' in which the houses are hollowed out and customised by criminals and it is extremely difficult for an outsider to penetrate – and the city-centre, for example the area of the *Ghetto*.<sup>56</sup> This is portrayed as one of the most dangerous districts of the city. These neighbourhoods are depicted as intricate, maze-like, and terrifying to both the outsider and the police, which find it very difficult to chase criminals within that 'laberinto di ragnaie, di serpai, di ortaglie, di corti, di capannacce'.<sup>57</sup> Piccini's *L'assassinio nel vicolo della Luna* (1883), which fictionalises and dramatises the locales and characters of the coeval *Firenze sotterranea*, is significantly set in the *Ghetto*, 'un luogo de' più orridi e sozzi di Firenze', in which it is almost impossible not to get lost.<sup>58</sup>

L'andito lungo, indescrivibile, ha, ad ogni svoltata, tre, quattro, cinque rami di scale, che salgono in direzioni differenti: è un vero laberinto, un luogo che pare edificato a bella posta per servire a tetre e misteriose imprese. Gli abitanti primitivi del Ghetto, lo chiamavano: l'*andron bujo*.<sup>59</sup>

Richard Maxwell notes that, in the new metropolis of the urban mysteries, 'the visitor who is not a native may well feel mystified'.<sup>60</sup> The innocent individual as much as the policeman wander in peril of the dangers emanating from these areas. In *L'assassinio nel vicolo della Luna*, two old and scared parents leave their house at night in search of their

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<sup>56</sup> Piccini, *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 182.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> Giulio Piccini, *L'assassinio nel vicolo della luna* (Milan: Treves, 1883), p. 71. Within the author's output with Lucertolo as protagonist, *L'assassinio nel vicolo della luna*, *Il processo Bartelloni*, and *La figlia dell'aria* are prevalently romantic melodramas into which various subplots of crime and detection have been incorporated. Instead, the third novel, *I ladri di cadaveri*, is a striking example of early detective fiction, which will be thoroughly examined in the following pages.

<sup>59</sup> Piccini, *L'assassinio nel vicolo della luna*, p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London*, p. 15.

missing daughter Antonietta and inevitably get lost ‘nei laberinti di quelle straduzze’, bringing about a sensation of total ineluctability: ‘in quei momenti il cieco sentiva più che mai tutto il peso della sua terribile sventura’.<sup>61</sup>

The labyrinth makes thus the city appear distorted, strange, and unfamiliar. It is noteworthy that Freud experienced the feeling of what he calls the uncanny – the deeply and internally familiar that suddenly reappears to us in seemingly unfamiliar forms – when he became lost one summer afternoon in one of the labyrinthine districts of an Italian provincial town:

I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street. [...] I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another *détour* at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny.<sup>62</sup>

In exploring the uncanniness of the experience, Freud observes that the labyrinthine streets cause an involuntary but obsessive repetition of movement that ‘forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable’.<sup>63</sup> Although the old couple in Piccini’s novel are finally able to extricate themselves from their plight and reach the exit of the maze, the two move in a compulsive way through streets that become progressively narrower, deeper, and darker. These passages of the novel are infused with images of claustrophobia and sensory and psychological confusion, which contribute to conjuring

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<sup>61</sup> Piccini, *L’assassinio nel vicolo della luna*, p. 38.

<sup>62</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ [1919], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (1917-1919), trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 217-52 (p. 237).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.



up a nightmarish, labyrinthine city in which there is little hope of escaping the evil that lies at its centre. People find themselves entrapped and hedged in by the perils that lurk in the urban labyrinth, which always suggests secrets, fears, anxieties, and hints at the presence of monsters prowling around the buildings. It is precisely the labyrinthine coils of such a dark district – ‘ogni strada era al buio, o quasi, illuminata soltanto da uno o due fanali, e da fanali a olio, a riverbero, con sottili lumicini’ – that engulf Antonietta’s lover, the painter Roberto Gandi, who is brutally attacked and almost murdered, triggering the investigation that dominates the second half of the story.<sup>64</sup>

Italian authors create a disorientating, alienating, and ultimately uncanny city that transforms the purposeful walker into a helpless victim, a version of the Gothic heroine trapped in a dark and threatening environment. In these texts, the uncanniness of the city, to use the words of Anthony Vidler, ‘finally became public’.<sup>65</sup> These places are essentially de-familiarised – ‘lungo le mura di San Rocco [...] vi credereste a mille miglia da Firenze!’ Piccini writes in *Firenze sotterranea* – with the effect of bolstering the strangeness of the environment and its inhabitants, which are rendered as remote as the castles and monasteries of the Gothic landscape, and of establishing a fundamental distance between the civilised and the barbarous, the observer and the observed.<sup>66</sup> While respectable people are physically and psychologically entrapped in the labyrinth, become hopelessly lost and are preyed upon by the various criminals that they encounter, delinquents negotiate the city’s mazes with ease. The born-criminal Pilato, one of the most famous characters of Mastriani’s *I misteri di Napoli*, perfectly knows the topography of the slums, while Lucertolo, the detective protagonist of *L’assassinio nel vicolo della Luna* who is, at least in this first adventure, inextricably tied to the criminal underworld,

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<sup>64</sup> Piccini, *L’assassinio nel vicolo della luna*, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Anthony Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Piccini, *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 88.

can easily move along the narrow lanes and filthy alleys of the centre of Florence. Knowledge of the underworld, ultimately, betrays evilness and bespeaks crime. This may explain the obsessive recurrence of the metaphor of the maze in Italian crime literature, which reflects bourgeois anxiety surrounding uncontrolled immigration and increasing urbanisation, and also suggests a specifically middle-class desire to reaffirm those class boundaries that were becoming increasingly blurred in the growing cities.

In these texts, not only the low-life locales but also the people who inhabit them are in themselves Gothic objects of horror. As Ann Williams famously argues, all gothic trappings signify ‘the other’.<sup>67</sup> The figure of the other, in the form of the deviant that threatens to erase boundaries, stability, light, and morality, figures most prominently in these texts. Pilato, one of the protagonists of *I misteri di Napoli*, is described as a born-criminal in a strictly Lombrosian vein:

su [di lui] la scienza antropologica è chiamata a fare gravissimi studi. Negazione assoluta e vivente dell’anima, egli odiava per istinto tutto ciò che è bello nel mondo morale e nel fisico. E questo odio si traduceva in un istinto feroce, come quello che si desta nelle belve affamate. Egli strangolava *per diletto*, per antipatia invincibile, per bisogno irresistibile.<sup>68</sup>

The character of Carolina, a prostitute introduced by Mastriani in *I vermi*, is similarly portrayed as belonging to a specific, recognisable, and inherently hopeless category of deviants: ‘riuniva nella sua persona tutt’i caratteri fisici e morali che costituiscono il tipo

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<sup>67</sup> Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. XI.

<sup>68</sup> Mastriani, *I misteri di Napoli*, III, p. 338.

della prostituta, caratteri che si verificano in 90 individui su 100 di questa disgraziata specie'.<sup>69</sup> Serao shows a strong ambiguity in her portrayal of the underclasses, in which a paternalistic and moralising view conflates into racialised discourses. While she criticises those who treat the poor as an inferior population marked by physically identifiable traits – 'la gente che abita in questi quattro quartieri popolari [...] non è una gente bestiale, selvaggia, oziosa [...] non è dunque una razza inferiore [...] non merita la sorte che le cose gl'impongono' – in the same districts she affirms to have personally encountered dangerous people, including prostitutes and beggars, 'sul cui viso la delinquenza è impressa e la cui espressione non mente'.<sup>70</sup> Valera often recurs to the paradigm of the unspeakable to render the otherness of the lower classes – 'vi sono bruttezze che sfuggono ad ogni manifestazione' and 'la penna talvolta rifugge dal narrare certe turpitudini' – while Corio emphasises their monstrosity, as can be seen from this description of an old female beggar: 'il viso di lei crespo, gli occhi infossati, aveva le ossa zigomatiche sporgenti, il naso adunco, il mento aguzzo e prominente, il colorito terreo, tutto insomma contribuiva a renderla orribile, mostruosa'.<sup>71</sup>

Such an obsession with the body reflects the disordered state of the nation and can be located in the discursive anxieties about the national body analysed by David Forgacs. According to him, in the social investigation of late nineteenth-century Italy 'the lower classes are imagined by middle-class or lower-middle class authors as bodies, both individual and collective, and in relation to other bodies: the city, society, and the state'.<sup>72</sup> The bodies of the socially undesirable – not only the urban poor, but also people from the

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<sup>69</sup> Mastriani, *I vermi*, I, pp. 160-1.

<sup>70</sup> Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, p. 15; *Il ventre di Napoli: vent'anni fa, adesso, l'anima di Napoli*, p. 98.

<sup>71</sup> Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, pp. 48, 107; Corio, *Milano in ombra*, p. 52.

<sup>72</sup> David Forgacs, 'Imagined Bodies: Rhetorics in Social Investigation in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy and France', *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies*, 1 (1992), 375-94 (p. 376).

South and women – were figured as so much diseased waste, thus imperilling the integrity of the idealised nation whose coordinates were reflected in the normative frame of the middle-class man.<sup>73</sup> In these novels, the slums appear as wounds in the social body on which parasites feed. These authors' outcasts bear evident physical marks of otherness and monstrosity. What is noteworthy is that even those authors like Serao and Valera who do not endorse the deterministic implications of positivist criminology eventually reinforce a racial, evolutionary view of wrongdoing.<sup>74</sup> Notwithstanding the reformatory intensions, these writers somewhat ambivalently further proto-biological deterministic explanations of moral inferiority and the solidification of prejudices about innate class differences. This is not surprisingly more accentuated in the works of Piccini. In a novel that will be discussed later, *I ladri di cadaveri* (1884), the narrator affirms that 'è noto che in certe famiglie, pur troppo, il crimine, la disposizione a delinquere sono ereditarii. Io, studiando negli archivi certi processi ho rintracciato sino alla quarta e quinta generazione la propaggine di certi ladri e delinquenti'.<sup>75</sup> The murderer is unequivocally described as 'un bruto, senza intelligenza e con appetiti di sangue da sbramare'.<sup>76</sup> Both

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<sup>73</sup> See David Forgacs, *Italy's Margins. Social Exclusion and Nation Formation Since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>74</sup> Corio and Piccini adopt a positivist approach in their analysis of the underclasses. Corio describes the lower classes in positivistic terms, as if it were a measurable and empirically classifiable entity: 'costituisce una società nella società, con alcune consuetudini degli interessati riconosciute per legge con lingua propria, con mestieri speciali, e con una certa gerarchia, di cui quelli che occupano gradi superiori, sono almeno temuti se non rispettati e amati'. Corio, *Milano in ombra*, p. 16. Corio's deterministic, evolutionary view of society is exemplified by this passage where, after having met the dwellers of a particularly filthy inn, he claims: 'i fisionomisti potrebbero quivi far studi di non lieve importanza'. Corio, *Milano in ombra*, p. 49. Mastriani, instead, displays a markedly Catholic view slightly tempered by socialism; yet he is clearly influenced by the positivistic intellectual climate of the period. In *I vermi*, for instance, he defines the existence of the underclasses as 'un fatto fisiologico'. Francesco Mastriani, 'Prefazione alla prima edizione', in Id., *I vermi*, I, pp. 5-8 (p. 5). Mastriani was particularly fascinated with phrenology, especially because his brother, Giuseppe, was a phrenologist. Although some of the key principles of phrenology subsumed into Lombrosian criminology, Mastriani's assumptions are in fact less radical than Lombroso's since they were compatible with the belief that physiological tendencies could be counteracted and corrected by social and moral improvement.

<sup>75</sup> Giulio Piccini, *I ladri di cadaveri* [1884] (Reggio Emilia: Aliberti, 2004), p. 168.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

Piccini and Corio apply a strong orientalising gaze to depict the underclasses.<sup>77</sup> Following Sue, who in *Les Mystères de Paris* relates ‘some episodes from the lives of *French savages* who are as far removed from civilizations as the Indians Cooper so vividly depicts’, Piccini uses the label ‘selvaggi d’Europa’ to describe ‘gente che prova della legge le pene e non il beneficio [...] gente dannata dalla ingiustizia, o dalla imprevidenza di chi dovrebbe pensare a educarla’.<sup>78</sup> Corio equally draws a parallel between the plebeians of Milan and some of the most remote populations of the world:

Riguardo ad ignoranza e ad abiettezza la feccia plebea di qualsiasi grande città può dare dei punti ai Papuas, agli Akka ed agli Esquimesi. E la marmaglia pullula e brulica in ogni grande città, eppure gli onesti cittadini non la curano, perché non la vedono quasi mai, e appena ne ricordano talvolta con disprezzo il nome.<sup>79</sup>

The inhabitants of the slums are exoticised as foreign or savage threats to Italy from within. They appear, to use Foucault’s words, both ‘as very close and quite alien, a perpetual threat to everyday life, but extremely distant in its origin and motives, both everyday and exotic in the milieu in which it takes place’.<sup>80</sup>

We can thus infer that, in the end, the authors fail to draw a clear-cut line between delinquents and indigents. Criminality ultimately seems invariably indistinguishable from poverty, whose historical and socio-political causes are transmuted into an essential

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<sup>77</sup> Orientalism, according to Edward W. Said, is seen as ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a ‘relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony’. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 3, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Piccini, ‘Proemio’, in Id., *Firenze sotterranea*, p. XXI.

<sup>79</sup> Corio, *Milano in ombra*, p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 286

nature no longer amenable to reform and change. Within such essentialist and fatalistic view, the poor are Gothicised, and replace the vicious aristocratic as the quintessentially Gothic villain, making the status of evilness move to the opposite end of the social scale: both are equally alien and hence frightening to the bourgeois readership.

The image of the labyrinth and the portrayal of the underclasses as truly other constitute deliberate attempts to organise a dichotomous city, in which the distance between the horrible and the horrified, the respectable and the outcast, is constantly buttressed. Through the metaphor of the underbelly, by which social investigators descend into hell, the city is imagined as a divided body, which must be gutted and sanitised in order to make it safe. The emphasis on stench, filth, and the narrator's response to them represents a further example. As Robert Mighall explains, while early Gothic fiction was not conspicuous for its attention to smells, as the horrors were principally associated with sight and touch, late nineteenth-century Gothic has become more fastidious about smell.<sup>81</sup> In his seminal *The Foul and the Fragrant* (1982) Alain Corbin defines this process as the 'redefinition of the intolerable', and explains how the bourgeoisie reinforced class difference by emphasising the smell and dirtiness of the lower orders – the great unwashed, a distinction that was not useful before the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>82</sup>

Bad smell is omnipresent in the Italian urban novels. The metaphors of mud, darkness, germination, swarms, and filth recur variously across the texts. The streets of Naples, Serao notes, are invariably 'sporche e oscure; e ognuna puzza in modo diverso', while inside a lugubrious inn visited by Valera 'regna un tanfo morboso. Volere o no, si è costretti a turarsi bocca e naso per non cadere tramortiti al suolo'.<sup>83</sup> These texts

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<sup>81</sup> Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic*, p. 65.

<sup>82</sup> Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination* [1982] (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1986), pp. 142, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, p. 11; Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, p. 63.

emphasise dirtiness and stink to such an extent that in *Il ventre di Milano*, a humorous and light-hearted example of urban novel that comprises a series of articles collected but also largely written by the *scapigliato* Cletto Arrighi in 1888, the Milanese author defends his choice to bring to light the cheerful side of the city precisely by criticising ‘i libri pieni di laidumi e di cattivi odori’ that have been so popular over the past few years. ‘Il pubblico’, Arrighi insists, ‘è stufo anche di putredine e cattivi odori. [...] L’effettaccio retorico della vostra letteratura verminosa e puzzolente è sfatato su tutta la linea’.<sup>84</sup>

Peter Baldwin has observed that in the nineteenth century offense to the olfactory sense and danger to health were substantially equated, with stench generally indicating the presence of unsafe putrid material.<sup>85</sup> While in Great Britain the social reformer Edwin Chadwick famously stated ‘all smell is disease’, in France, common to nearly all literature – fictional, political, and hygienic – on the growth of Paris in the nineteenth century was a profound and fearful disgust at the city’s filth and smells.<sup>86</sup> The reduced threshold of tolerance that characterises the nineteenth century, together with ideas about miasmas and decaying matter, sanctioned and reiterated the connection between smell and disease.<sup>87</sup> The discovery of germ theory in the 1880s, which proved that stinks were not in themselves particularly hazardous, did not immediately help to assuage sanitary anxieties. Mark Jenner has explained that changes in the scientific models of sensory perception were not automatically translated into equivalent transformations in subjective understandings of sensation or perception.<sup>88</sup> Until the 1890s, the miasmatic doctrine was

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<sup>84</sup> Cletto Arrighi, *Il Ventre di Milano* [1888] (Milan: Longanesi, 1977), pp. 7, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Baldwin, *Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 128.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148. See also David Barnes, *The Making of a Social Disease: Tuberculosis in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995), p. 24; *Id.*, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle Against Filth and Germs* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>87</sup> Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, p. 58.

<sup>88</sup> Mark S.R. Jenner, ‘Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories’, *The American Historical Review*, 116.2 (2011), 335-51 (p. 346).

used to explain the etiology of various infectious diseases associated with the slums such as cholera and tuberculosis.

It is evident how the miasmatic theory of disease exerted a powerful hold over the popular imagination in Italy in the nineteenth century. Serao, for instance, repeatedly utilises the analogy of the fetid swamp: in the middle of the *Via dei Mercanti*, she graphically writes that ‘il ruscello è nero, fetido, non si muove, impantanato’.<sup>89</sup> Miasmatic theory was used to explain how certain diseases prevailed in places where the air was foul, for instance in near swamps, which produced exhalations, or where excrement or rotten food were left to accumulate. It was believed, in other words, that the air itself was defiled and that diseases were transmitted when one breathed it in.<sup>90</sup>

In these texts, filth often tends to slide from material to moral filth. Piccini associates indigence and moral corruption when he asserts that ‘la corruzione morale si accumula dove stagna la vita, come i miasmi si sviluppano da certe acque morte’.<sup>91</sup> In the introduction to *I vermi*, Mastriani uses what would later become a staple device in warnings to soldiers of the risks of venereal disease, namely the image of the infective body of the woman, hidden beneath a seductive appearance: ‘colla mano sulla coscienza, solleverò il velo che copre la frine impudica, non perché il vostro corpo si arresti e si diletta su quelle forme prevaricatrici, ma perché sotto quella rosa epidermide scopriate il pus venefico che vi si asconde’.<sup>92</sup> The breath of the woman is ‘pestifero e morboso’ and hence infective.<sup>93</sup>

As Forgacs observes, the striving for ‘truth, objectivity, and validity as knowledge [...] was always indissociable from fears and anxieties of touch, infection, and

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<sup>89</sup> Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, p. 10.

<sup>90</sup> See Forgacs, *Italy's Margins*, p. 39.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 10; Piccini, *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 185.

<sup>92</sup> Mastriani, *I vermi*, I, p. 27.

<sup>93</sup> Mastriani, *I vermi*, I, p. 27.



corruption'.<sup>94</sup> Although the city is prevalently depicted in dichotomic terms, the association between stench and disease makes explicit the threatening possibility of the contamination between the criminal underworld and the rest of society. The places frequented by criminals and indigents, Corio alerts, are also populated by 'moltissimi giovani di oneste famiglie, i quali incominciano in questi turpi luoghi a mettere il piede sullo sdrucciolo del vizio, per finire poi a precipitare nel baratro del delitto'.<sup>95</sup> Even in Naples, where the physical segregation of the lower classes appears more visible, anxieties about boundary transgressions irrupt: Serao acknowledges that in the surroundings of *Via di Santa Candida*, a beautiful area that constitutes the 'strada della salute e della redenzione del popolo napoletano', unfortunately 'non si aggirano, colà, che ladruncoli, camorristi, pregiudicati e donne di mala vita'.<sup>96</sup> The authors realised that in the new metropolis the separation between poor and more prosperous streets was not as sharp as previously thought and that although there were pockets of severe deprivation, these were frequently located in close proximity to more affluent areas. In cities where the wealthier, lighter, cleaner, and safer areas exist side by side with the poorer, darker, dirtier, and more dangerous ones, crossing that 'pericoloso confine', as Corio puts it, might turn into a nightmare.<sup>97</sup>

Proximity, then, becomes a source of real horror. With unattainable distinction and separation between what is intrinsically criminal from what is, on the contrary, simply a consequence of extreme poverty, and with infection spreading, and the world of slums potentially engulfing all classes, the lives of ordinary people like the reader are threatened. As Piccini observes, 'la città del delitto sorge proprio in mezzo a quella delle

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<sup>94</sup> Forgacs, 'Imagined Bodies', p. 376.

<sup>95</sup> Corio, *Milano in ombra*, p. 42.

<sup>96</sup> Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli: vent'anni fa, adesso, l'anima di Napoli*, p. 99.

<sup>97</sup> Corio, *Milano in ombra*, p. 95.

industrie, delle chiese e delle scuole'.<sup>98</sup> There are numerous neighbourhoods in Florence 'in condizioni di pestilenza e di contagio' that threaten to contaminate 'tante povere e buone famiglie, che abitano le prossime strade'.<sup>99</sup> The danger of contagion constitutes one of the deepest and most hidden fears shared by criminologists and writers alike, and it is a concept particularly prone to Gothicisation because of its invisibility, uncontrollability, and killing force. The ideal city-centre, the heart of this apparently civilised environment, was supposed to engender domesticity, provide privacy and protection from the masses, and promote respectability. Instead, it is transformed, using the words of Botting, into 'a dark labyrinth [...] a site of nocturnal corruption and violence, a locus of real horror'.<sup>100</sup> What finally emerges is not simply a middle-class anxiety about loss of control of its space, but also a growing fear of Italy as deteriorating into a nationwide slum. The vision of a world in which a contagious principle threatens to reduce all differences and distinctions to a generalised incoherence is markedly and unmistakably Gothic, a dark universe in which, as Jerrold E. Hogle argues, all the binary oppositions of our culture 'cannot maintain their separations' and inevitably collapse.<sup>101</sup>

Ultimately, although Italian authors seek to be directly involved in the social and political processes of state-building, the ideological framework underpinning their texts remains essentially elusive, and their political stance is far from being advanced. Piccini and Corio appeal to the sense of responsibility of Florence's and Milan's wealthier citizens, calling for an improvement of the city's welfare services, from night shelters for the homeless to schools for disadvantaged children, while Valera limits himself to suggest, through a violent language that betrays its sterility, some sort of popular

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<sup>98</sup> Piccini, *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 23.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>100</sup> Botting, *Gothic*, p. 11.

<sup>101</sup> Hogle, 'Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture', p. 11

uprising.<sup>102</sup> These sociological inquiries are carried within such a moralistic dimension that eventually frustrates any fruitful socio-political analysis. The treatment of the subaltern classes is moralising and paternalistic, with the poor presented as savages in need of essential goods (both material and spiritual) that the upper classes/colonisers are supposed to provide: charity from the wealthy people, in fact, is often identified as one of the few solutions to the problem of poverty.<sup>103</sup> Their political condemnation of the worst of the living conditions of the lower classes remained inseparable from expressions of horror and repulsion. The produced knowledge becomes ultimately functional to a project of policing and medical control.

Moreover, the administration of the state is denounced as inefficient, but no alternative is posited. Valera admits the difficulty of bringing order in a society in which inequality is so widespread – ‘è possibile infrenare o estinguere la razza dei malviventi nello stato attuale? È possibile arginare la furia se essa ingrossa sempre? È possibile esigere moralità, dove il vizio è una necessità ineluttabile, imperiosa, assoluta?’ – and when a physician asks him what could be done given the lack of action of the state, he avoids the answer and simply places hope in the future generations: ‘bisognerebbe prima sostituire alle vostre teste venerande e quadrangolari quelle della generazione crescente’.<sup>104</sup>

Italian authors do not take a coherent socio-political stance and fail to formulate and put forward any actual and concrete proposal to resolve the problems of poverty and

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<sup>102</sup> It must be reminded, though, that, perhaps coincidentally, Serao touches on the true cause of the spread of cholera in Naples, that is polluted water.

<sup>103</sup> Corio, for instance, admits, ‘eppure con un po’ di carità si potrebbero disarmare tanti odii, ammansare tante ire, cancellare tanti rancori tra classe e classi di cittadini’. Corio, *Milano in ombra*, p. 8. Valera, in this respect, is the only one who rejects what he sees as another form of begging: ‘dite quello che volete. Magnificate pure la generosità di quegli uomini che lasciarono in loro patrimonio per dare uno sdraio alla plebe; ma noi preferiamo ucciderci piuttosto che ricorrere a questa beneficenza’. Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, p. 215.

<sup>104</sup> Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, pp. 225, 228.

criminality, besides resorting to violence. The only exception, in fact, involves repressive intervention, and consists in the eradication of some of the most notorious slums. Mastriani in *I vermi* writes ironically that ‘sempre è più *pericolosa* alla società la classe de’ *medici* che quella de’ *mendici*’, but he finally admits that ‘bisogna demolire que’ tenebrosi nidi di bruchi’ so that ‘gli abitanti di quelle contrade possano unqua fruire de’ vantaggi che la civiltà e la libertà arrecano a’ popoli’.<sup>105</sup> For Serao, the government is held responsible for the conditions of the proletariat in Naples, and refuses to endorse the dismantlement of the underbelly of the city propounded by the Prime Minister Depretis. Nonetheless, when it comes to suggesting some kind of political intervention, she simply replaces Depretis’s idea of ‘sventrare’ Naples with a particularly vague ‘rifare’, which still implies the destruction of the slums.<sup>106</sup> After all, this is the same expression that Piccini uses to advocate the disembowelment and subsequent renovation of the centre of Florence, an initiative that was actually put into practice in 1885: ‘bisogna abbattere varii punti di Firenze e ricostruirli di nuovo’.<sup>107</sup>

These texts reveal a very pessimistic view of the prospects of the new-born state at large. The South in particular emerges as a dark and hopeless region, devastated by injustice and corruption. Mastriani is deeply sceptical about the possibility that his

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<sup>105</sup> Mastriani, *I vermi*, III, p. 143, IV, p. 168.

<sup>106</sup> Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, p. 12.

<sup>107</sup> Piccini, *Firenze sotterranea*, p. 22. Piccini in the preface of the 1900 edition of his book underscores his crucial role in this initiative and stresses the positive effects of urban renewal on the problem of criminality: ‘l’aver distrutto l’antico Centro di Firenze fu la più bella tra le opere compiute in servizio alla cospicua città, nel secolo. [...] Seppe, distruggendo i casolari immondi, riedificare un quartiere salubre, risanare Firenze dalla sua più turpe deformità: aprire un nuovo centro a’ traffichi, a lieta dimora, ov’ era un focolare d’infezione, di miseria, di vizio e di delitto’. Piccini, ‘Proemio’, in Id., *Firenze sotterranea*, pp. XXIII-XXIX. Operations of renovation of the urban structure took place in Naples as well in 1885. As Serao acknowledges in a revised version of her *Il ventre di Napoli*, published in 1906, behind its new façade – larger and more spacious – very little has actually changed: ‘noi possiam credere che, veramente, il Rettifilo abbia dato al popolo napoletano tutto quello che gli mancava, e, sopra tutto, lo posson credere tutti coloro che passano qui per un giorno o un mese. [...] Eppure questa illusione non resisterebbe a una osservazione più minuta’. Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli: vent’anni fa, adesso, l’anima di Napoli*, pp. 92-3.

homeland could ever improve: ‘non è quistione né di forma di governo, né di riforme politiche, né di più accomodata amministrazione. Sia questo o quel governo, sia monarchia assoluta o repubblica, le cose non muteranno giammai in bene, ove il sistema sociale resti il medesimo.’<sup>108</sup> Although in different ways, these texts constitute a strong critique of the unificatory process. The way in which cities are represented in the Italian mysteries symbolises the worrying prospects of the country, a discordant amalgamation of irreconcilable viewpoints, a place which was only formally unified, but actually plagued by economic inequality and an irreparable sense of pessimism.

It is remarkable how these texts intervene in the debate around the dangerous classes by realising a sort of mediation between two radically different positions. On the one hand, it may be argued that fictions of crime, in this case, come paradoxically to serve the interests of politics, by valorising the repressive, violent choices of the state and by naturalising class difference. The representation of the underclass as other and inherently dangerous offers narratives of scientific justification for many of the racial, national, and gender prejudices that formed the political justification for the creation of the state. Instead of providing answers to the problem of criminality and finding remedies to the desperate socio-economic conditions of the lower classes, Italian writers’ portrayal of low-life contributes to the further marginalisation of a vast range of cultural others that makes no discrimination between criminals and those various outcasts roaming the underbelly of the city, including vagrants, beggars, and prostitutes. On the other hand, the continuous emphasis on the insanitary conditions of the locales frequented by criminals and indigents reveals the importance of the environment in the production of crime. These texts are thus an effect of mediation and re-elaboration of different meanings and values in circulation at that precise historical moment. Although in a way they fundamentally

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<sup>108</sup> Mastriani, *I misteri di Napoli*, III, p. 548.

reproduce the same ruling ideology that they were supposed to challenge, in another they set the ground for a new interpretation of the phenomenon of criminality that takes into account discordant theories and perspectives.

This is what interestingly characterises the early twentieth-century theorisations of Niceforo. In these years, the last of Lombroso's pupils founded a new scientific discipline – the anthropology of the lower classes – which integrated criminology, anthropology, physiology, and statistics in order to provide a comprehensive and more accurate understanding of the moral inferiority of the subaltern classes and their abnormal inclination to committing crimes. In a series of studies written both in French and Italian – *Les classes pauvres, recherches anthropologiques et sociales* (1905), *Forza e ricchezza: studi sulla vita fisica ed economica delle classi sociali* (1906), *Antropologia delle classi povere* (1910) – Niceforo directs Lombroso's criminology towards environmental eugenics, inscribing socio-economic causes within an anthropological and racial scheme of interpretation.<sup>109</sup> As a voracious reader and acute investigator of popular forms of writing, Niceforo certainly came across the texts I have analysed here. As well as providing a precious testimony of a cultural climate that was rapidly mutating, on which Niceforo was ready to capitalise, this literature, I argue, constituted a direct influence on the criminologist.

It is revealing that Niceforo, with the help of Sighele, appropriated urban novels' rhetorical strategies, imagery, and atmosphere for the socio-anthropological descriptions of the dangerous classes in Rome in the study *La mala vita a Roma* (1898).<sup>110</sup> Precisely

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<sup>109</sup> See Angelo Matteo Caglioti, 'Race, Statistics and Italian Eugenics: Alfredo Niceforo's Trajectory from Lombroso to Fascism (1876-1960)', *European History Quarterly*, 47.3 (2017), 461-89 (p. 467).

<sup>110</sup> The label 'dangerous classes' recurs frequently throughout the book, indicating that it was ostensibly still part and parcel of criminological language. This category includes petty criminals, parasites, prostitutes who flood in and thrive in the insanitary conditions and extreme poverty of the underbelly of the city on one hand, and professional delinquents on the other. It is important

like novelists, the two scientists stage stories of murder and mystery, re-create dialogues between delinquents, and address the reader directly. The assumption that the crowd is naturally subversive and criminal had received scientific validation in the researches of Sighele, who suggests that the seed of delinquency is found in the proximity and agglomeration of bodies, but also in the tendency of big cities to attract suggestible types.<sup>111</sup> This text constitutes a compelling example insofar as, towards the end of the century, social investigators continued to study the crimes perpetrated ‘nelle grandi città da una oscura popolazione, che ne forma il sotto-suolo immondo e pericoloso’.<sup>112</sup> Interestingly, the two authors realise this by taking the reader ‘attraverso i labirinti oscuri dei bassifondi romani’.<sup>113</sup> The socio-political situation has changed in *fin-de-siècle* Italy, but the city is still portrayed as a labyrinthine, frightening universe, and the ghost of the dangerous classes has not ceased to call into question Italy’s status as a modern country.

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to underline that most of the initiatives proposed by the positivist school had not been incorporated in the criminal code of 1889. It is thus unsurprising that the two authors do not refrain from accusing the government of having failed in the fight against crime, which sadly remains ‘la piaga [...] più grave del nostro paese’. They also add, ‘non esitiamo a dichiarare che la nostra legge penale, di fronte alla mala vita delle grandi città, non fa nulla, o – se fa qualche cosa – non fa che peggiorare il male’. It is thus necessary, the two argue, ‘chiudere il rubinetto alla delinquenza incorreggibile – bisogna incanalare, d’altra parte, la delinquenza correggibile in un ambiente diverso da quello ove si tengono sotto chiave i vecchi ladri, gli omicidi nati, i recidivi continui’. Alfredo Niceforo and Scipio Sighele, *La mala vita a Roma* (Turin: Roux Frassati e C. editori, 1898), pp. 20, 214, 215-16.

<sup>111</sup> Sighele argues that the essence of crowd behaviour lies in imitation and suggestion and it is ‘predisposta, per una fatale legge d’aritmetica psicologica, più al male che al bene. [...] Vi è cioè nella folla una tendenza latente alla ferocia che costituisce, se posso dir così, il fattore organico complesso delle future sue manifestazioni; il quale fattore, però, (come il fattore antropologico nell’individuo) può prendere una direzione buona o cattiva, secondo l’occasione o la suggestione offertagli dall’ambiente esterno. Scipio Sighele, *I delitti della folla studiati secondo la psicologia, il diritto e la giurisprudenza* [1902] (Turin: Bocca, 1910), p. 57. The principal cause of the spread of criminality within the city is ‘l’agglomerato di troppe anime in un dato spazio’. A second factor is that the city is ‘un ago magnetico che esercita la sua attrazione su tutto l’ambiente che la circonda. Ma appunto come l’ago magnetico attira soltanto o soprattutto certi corpi, così la grande città spiega la sua influenza soltanto o soprattutto su certi individui [...] *suggestionabili*’. Niceforo and Sighele, *La mala vita a Roma*, pp. 13, 14-5.

<sup>112</sup> Niceforo and Sighele, *La mala vita a Roma*, p. 12. Rome is not the most criminous Italian city but, as the two authors claim, it has hitherto been completely overlooked by criminologists, social reformers, and novelists: ‘mentre si è – con maggiore o minore ampiezza – analizzata la criminalità di Palermo e di Napoli, e almeno sfiorata quella di Milano e di Torino, si è del tutto trascurata quella di Roma’. Niceforo and Sighele, *La mala vita a Roma*, p. 29.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

## **Conclusions**

The turbulent climate that followed Italian unification, marked by increasing urbanisation and early processes of industrialisation, was accompanied by numerous debates and theorisations about the so-called dangerous classes. To analyse the problems of poverty and criminality and its various ramifications in the city, positivist criminologists, police delegates, and, more generally, a large part of the ruling class, produced images of racial and cultural degeneration, while others denounced reductionist stereotypes of the underclasses' behaviour based on race and stressed the centrality of environment and education.

Italian literature, as this chapter has shown, took part in the conflict, and played an ambiguous role. The texts I have taken into consideration had radical and reformist intentions, as they were designed to spur the government to action by addressing the acute problems of slum housing and ill health. On the one hand, in spite of their sympathetic attitude towards the poor and their supposedly denunciatory and challenging intentions, Italian authors ended up elaborating their versions of cultural and racial evolution and degeneration through semi-fictional formulations and theoretical discussions of the slums. However different, these texts address and explore similar socio-political concerns, particularly related to class fluidity and infectiousness, exploiting the rhetoric of the Gothic with the effect of demonising a vast range of racial and cultural others, from the prostitute to the vagrant, against whom they could express their fears, grievances, and concerns about the country. The attempt to document or catalogue the nation was shot through with fears of contamination and infection that proximity to those categories of contagion entailed. The depiction of the poor as an illness, a parasite that inevitably falls



into the hands of evil, infecting the rest of society, codified the image of the lower class as a foreign entity, alien to the more progressive bourgeoisie.

On the other hand, though, the authors suggest how the insanitary environments in which the underclasses are forced to live and the dreadful socio-economic quality of their lives heavily contribute to a further physical as well as moral degeneration. The simultaneous presence within these texts of diverse attitudes and often opposite perspectives exposes their ambivalent character, and the impossibility of writers to take a solid political stance and to remove from their minds positivistic paradigms that had been essentially internalised; it also reveals the complexity of an elusive, manifold, and fast-changing cultural climate. It is precisely within this context that we must position the later researches on the lower classes of Alfredo Niceforo, one of the most influential twentieth-century exponents of Italian eugenics, whose success went even beyond the end of the Second World War.

As we saw, the concept of the dangerous classes would continue to figure in the rhetoric of criminologists and sociologists for several years. Nonetheless, it is indisputable that from the mid 1880s, as Francesco Benigno remarks, the emergence of the new paradigm of the naturally-born delinquent propounded by Lombroso progressively overshadowed the idea of the dangerous classes within the popular imaginary.<sup>114</sup> The enigmatic nature and the abnormal mind of the monstrous born-criminal were placed at the centre of increasing interest in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The next chapter will precisely look at the multifarious responses that the theorisations around the mind of the criminal engendered in the field of literary fiction.

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<sup>114</sup> Benigno, 'Ripensare le "classi pericolose" italiane', p. 75.

### Chapter 3. CRIMINAL MINDS

The publication in 1876 of *L'uomo delinquente*, in which Lombroso delineates his theory on the strictly biological foundations of crime, sparked a heated and long-lasting debate within the scientific community that was essentially centred on the criminogenic factors underlying the phenomenon of delinquency. While for most jurists, including Francesco Carrara and Luigi Lucchini, whose orientation towards crime and punishment was rooted in the classical theorisations of the eighteenth-century philosopher and jurist Cesare Beccaria, crime constitutes an expression of free will and must be investigated as a social phenomenon, positivists such as Lombroso and Ferri argue that biology is crucial to the understanding of delinquents and morality is not a valuable criterion for judgement of those born with a proclivity for wrongdoing.<sup>1</sup>

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised the significant limitations of the two-schools approach, suggesting that the conflict was much less polarised and certainly more complex and nuanced than generally acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> Neither side relied

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<sup>1</sup> See Mario Sbriccoli, 'Il diritto penale liberale. La "rivista penale" di Luigi Lucchini, 1874-1900', *Quaderni Fiorentini*, 16 (1987), 105-83. Carlo Federico Grosso, 'Le grandi correnti del pensiero penalistico italiano tra Ottocento e Novecento', in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 12. La criminalità*, ed. by Luciano Violante (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), pp. 7-34. The medicalisation of delinquency that the positivist criminology operated was seen by the jurists and legal experts as a substantial invasion into the legal arena by non-legal discourses through the construction of what Foucault defines as the dangerous individual, who is no longer subject to the concept of responsibility. While previously 'only an act, defined by law as an infraction, can result in a sanction, modifiable of course according to the circumstances or the intentions', after Lombroso the focus shifted to 'the dangerous individual as potential source of acts [...] no longer, of course, based on what he is by statute [...] but based on what he is by nature, according to his constitution, character traits, or his pathological variables'. Foucault argues that it was this new mechanism of discipline that permitted the insertion of medical experts into courtrooms and that allowed for the penetration of the legal system 'from below' without necessarily changing the system of legal adjudication. Foucault, 'About the Concept of the "Dangerous Individual" in 19th-Century Legal Psychiatry', pp. 17, 18. Objections to the positivist approach came also from the Catholic church, which defended free will and stressed the personal and legal responsibility that resulted from choice.

<sup>2</sup> See the pioneering Guarnieri, 'Alienists on Trial'. Garfinkel's monumental *Criminal Law in Liberal and Fascist Italy* is largely devoted to reducing the polarity of the conflict. For instance, a towering figure in the legal history of Liberal Italy such as Ugo Conti, as Garfinkel contends,

exclusively on one source or the other. The positivists came progressively to include environmental factors in their etiology of crime, while those such as Napoleone Colajanni who considered lawbreakers as morally responsible for their actions and advocated prevalently social explanations, accepted the idea of atavism as a determinant in inherited forms of delinquency.<sup>3</sup> Many jurists and sociologists did not, then, completely rule out the proposition that structural or operational anomalies in the brain may account for unusual behaviours, and sometimes agreed on the possible sources of these abnormalities: a congenital condition, either inherited or developed during gestation, or a problem acquired as a result of illness, trauma, and ageing.<sup>4</sup>

Although the positivists failed to make a significant impact on the promulgation of the 1889 criminal code, the new theories about genetics and biology applied to the study of criminality spread throughout the Western world. Mostly as a result of Lombroso's work, as Nicole Rafter underlines, 'the understanding of criminality as a medical problem became dominant and almost automatic, an assumption more than a proposition'.<sup>5</sup> Scientists began to work from the inside out, seeking to pinpoint the alterations inside the body that produced deviancy. The strong emphasis that positivist criminologists placed on the bodies of criminals and deviants contributed to a renewed attention to physiology and brain traits, which fuelled attempts to reach a more accurate understanding of the psyche and its inner workings. In this respect, it is too often overlooked, as Emilia Musumeci reminds us, that for Lombroso and the positivist school in general the

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straddles the two schools rather than adhering to one of them: his view of guilt and punishment appeared to fit with the so-called classical school, while his concepts of social defence and criminal dangerousness seem to embrace the penology of the rival positivist school. Garfinkel, *Criminal Law in Liberal and Fascist Italy*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> 'Se il Lombroso rinunziando alla sua abituale instabilità si fosse fermato al concetto dell'atavismo [...] avrebbe spiegato facilmente e semplicemente il delinquente nato'. Napoleone Colajanni, *La sociologia criminale*, 2 vols (Catania: Tropea, 1889), I, pp. 450n-1n.

<sup>4</sup> See Ashley, "Misfits" in *Fin De Siècle France and Italy*, pp. 10-1.

<sup>5</sup> Rafter, *The Criminal Brain*, p. 85.

psychology of the criminal was as much relevant as its physical body.<sup>6</sup>

Discussions that took as their topic criminal states of mind proliferated in the last twenty years of the century. The criminal psyche, as well as its own feelings and thoughts, became for the first time the object of a prodigious attention, generating a great response in the field of literature. In one often cited passage of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Mina Harker responds to Professor Van Helsing's urgings to describe the Count by stressing that Lombroso would classify him 'a criminal type' due to his 'imperfectly formed mind'.<sup>7</sup> It is unsurprising that contemporary research on the nature and the mind of criminals largely filtered into Italian crime fiction.

Hence, this chapter analyses a variety of transgressor-centred crime stories that, I argue, constitute embryonic examples of psychological thrillers, a hybrid, permeable, and mobile form that emphasises feeling and sensation, evoking fears and anxieties that arise from the involvement of the protagonist in situations of physical and psychological danger. This form has received increasing critical scrutiny over the past few years by scholars such as Martin Rubin, Lee Horsley, Sharon Packer, Philip Simpson, and Kristopher Mecholsky.<sup>8</sup> The latter, in his historical overview of the development of the psychological thriller, has recognised the Gothic, along with Freudian psychoanalysis, and the mass-market publishing industry, as the principal historical trends that prompted the rise of this sub-genre. In this period, as Botting comments, Gothic tropes and motifs

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<sup>6</sup> Emilia Musumeci, 'Against the Rising Tide of Crime: Cesare Lombroso and Control of the "Dangerous Classes" in Italy, 1861-1940', *Crime, History & Societies*, 22.2 (2018), 83-106 (p. 93).

<sup>7</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* [1897] (New York: Cosimo, 2009), p. 293.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Rubin, *Thrillers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Id., *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 127-57; Sharon Packer, *Movies and the Modern Psyche* (London: Praeger, 2007); Philip Simpson, 'Noir and the Psycho-Thriller', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, pp. 187-97; Kristopher Mecholsky, 'The Psychological Thriller in Context.', in *The American Thriller*, ed. by Gary Hoppenstand (Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2014), pp. 48-70.

were no longer able to embody and externalise fears and anxieties, and were thus internalised and centred on the individual.<sup>9</sup> The celebration of excess – either in the extremity of the violence of the crime itself, or in the way in which the narrative is told – and the psychologically unstable protagonist are two elements that very closely link the Gothic novel and the psychological thriller.<sup>10</sup> As Philip Simpson argues, in this sub-genre crime is represented as an outward manifestation of the internal workings of the mind of the criminal, who is ‘imbued with a gothic brand of pseudo-supernatural cunning and malice’ that resembles the predations of the supernaturally evil and monstrous denizens of the Gothic novel.<sup>11</sup>

Freudian psychoanalysis, though, was not the first attempt to develop a theory of the mind. As we saw, late nineteenth-century criminological studies sought to provide explanations for the origins of evil by privileging the study of the criminal psyche. This chapter retraces and reassesses the development of this crime fiction form and seeks precisely to demonstrate that late nineteenth and early-twentieth century Italian psychological thrillers have their roots in contemporary theorisations on the criminal mind.<sup>12</sup> I will analyse here a select number of crime stories that variously scrutinise the innermost recesses of the criminal’s mind, offering powerful explorations of evil human potential. In these years, research into the criminal’s mind was varied, unsystematic, and

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<sup>9</sup> Botting, *Gothic*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Spooner, ‘Crime and the Gothic’, pp. 245-7.

<sup>11</sup> Simpson, ‘Noir and the Psycho-Thriller’, p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> Scholars have generally claimed that the psychological thriller only flourished in the second half of the twentieth century as a response to various social, political, and cultural circumstances, including the unprecedented disruptions brought by the two world wars, and the rise of aggressive ideologies and racial conflicts. See Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, p. 117. Following in the footsteps of American and British commentators, Italian critics have placed the birth of the psychological thriller in the late twentieth century, in novels such as Carlo Lucarelli’s *Almost Blue* (1997), which is told from three different perspectives, one of which is that of the serial-killer. See Crovi, *Tutti i colori del giallo*, pp. 135-6; Guagnini, *Dal giallo al noir e oltre*, p. 111-2.

often inconsistent. Lombroso's thinking about the causes of crime was massively incoherent, and his explanations for criminal behaviour were often self-contradictory. He never found a single, universal law of delinquency, obliging him to continuously outline exceptions and permanently redesign the whole system.<sup>13</sup> The evidence of such problems can be found in the continuous proliferation of specific typologies of criminals whose common, natural matrix resulted to be impossible to find.

This lack of homogenous, organic, and uniform theories of crime contributed to enriching literary configurations, which in turn played a crucial part in disseminating and shaping discourses on the criminal's nature. It is thus particularly interesting to determine how textual representations of delinquency responded to such a complex intellectual climate, reinforcing, challenging, or manipulating dominant and subordinate views. The first section of this chapter investigates the crime-confession nexus, a paradigm that typifies many crime stories of the time, which treat the criminal not as an aberration of nature but as a fruit of Italian society's weaknesses and anomalies. The second section looks at the figure of the sexual monster in the context of emerging sexology and examines how the issue of homosexuality is articulated through the connection between disease and crime. The relationship between crime and Gothic fictions and criminological science, as this chapter will eventually suggest, was far from unilateral. While criminology profoundly influenced the emergence of crime literature, generating a varied and composite spectrum of approaches to the exploration of criminal minds, narratives of criminal transgression proved central to the modern construction of deviancy in the

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<sup>13</sup> Lombroso was unable to explain how the ultimate and immediate causes of crime interrelated, and, as time went on, he put forward other ultimate causes – mental disease and moral insanity, epilepsy, degeneration sexuality and malformed genitals – without clearly articulating their relationship to atavism. In the last edition of *L'uomo delinquente*, published between 1896 and 1897, he classifies criminals according to six different categories: the born-criminal, the insane criminal, the epileptic criminal, the occasional criminal, the one who commits crimes of passion, and the so-called 'pazzo morale'.

cultural imaginary.

### 3.1 Exploring the Guilty Mind

The exploration of guilt, which for Lee Horsley lies at the heart of contemporary noir fiction, constitutes a peculiar characteristic of much nineteenth-century crime literature.<sup>14</sup> One of the most famous examples is Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), which narrates the mental anguish and the moral dilemmas of a young student, Rodion Raskolnikov, following his murder of an old woman. Much of the novel focuses on the murderer's increasing need to confess, which he finally does under psychological pressure exerted by a judicial investigator. Lombroso, as we have seen in chapter one, praises Dostoevsky for his accurate portrayal of what the criminologist defines as the occasional criminal, one who tends to insanity in his egotism and jealousy, kills his old pawnbroker for utilitarian reasons, and is then so overwhelmed with remorse that he finally confesses.<sup>15</sup> Ferri slightly disagrees with Lombroso, and considers the protagonist of the novel as the archetypal insane criminal, but he remains equally impressed with Dostoevsky's talent as criminal anthropologist.<sup>16</sup>

Dostoevsky's interest in introspection and spiritual struggle influenced many authors, including most famously D'Annunzio, who was repeatedly accused of having plagiarised the Russian writer. The crime-confession pattern frequently recurs in Italian literature of these years, with numerous writers investigating the mentally devastating consequences of a crime upon a subject who is not a habitual offender. An excellent

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<sup>14</sup> Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Lombroso, 'Il tipo criminale nella letteratura', pp. 352-4

<sup>16</sup> Ferri, *I delinquenti nell'arte*, pp. 175-83.

example is Italo Svevo's short story 'L'assassinio di via Belpoggio', which appeared penned by Enrico Samigli in nine instalments from the 4<sup>th</sup> of October to 13<sup>th</sup> October 1890 in the newspaper *L'Indipendente*.<sup>17</sup> Giorgio, a porter suffering financial hardship, impulsively kills a near stranger to steal his money. He is an 'inept' like many of Svevo's other characters, 'che col suo carattere poco energico, inerte, avrebbe sempre cercato mezzi e modi e finito col non agire che al sicuro, dunque mai'.<sup>18</sup> Profoundly frustrated, not having been able to live up to his mother's expectations, both economically and work-wise, Giorgio kills for indigence but mostly for self-affirmation. Soon after though, when the news of the murder spreads throughout the city, Giorgio begins to feel progressively haunted and then entrapped. Svevo describes in detail Giorgio's own interior ontological struggles, which lead him to commit a banal mistake that eventually proves fatal: after discovering that an eyewitness has given the police a profile of the killer and his own hat, Giorgio goes to a shop to purchase a new one, but, on his way out, he inadvertently leaves the old hat in the shop, through which the police are able to identify and incriminate him.

The same pattern is also explored in two major novels – Emilio De Marchi's *Il cappello del prete* (1887) and Luigi Capuana's *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* (1901) – which offer complex typologies of murderers who are not, apparently, congenitally evil.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Italo Svevo, 'L'assassinio di via Belpoggio', [1890] in *L'assassinio di via Belpoggio e altri racconti* (Milan: Guide Moizzi, 2011) pp. 5-29. Italo Svevo (1861-1928) was one of the pseudonyms of the writer and playwright Aaron Ettore Schmitz. Better known for the classic modernist novel *La coscienza di Zeno* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1923), Svevo is one of the most relevant Italian writers of the time.

<sup>18</sup> Svevo, 'L'assassinio di via Belpoggio', p. 6. For the concept of the 'inept' in Svevo see Enrico Ghidetti, *Per un ritratto di Italo Svevo: ipotesi sull'inetto e sull'ebreo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1980); Guido Baldi, *Le maschere dell'inetto: lettura di Senilità* (Turin: Paravia Scriptorium, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Luigi Capuana (1839-1915) was a writer and critic. Born in Sicily, he is recognised as one of the most active *versiti* writers of the period, and the most instrumental in introducing the principles of French naturalism into Italian literary culture. He was also particularly interested in spiritualism and other occult practices. As well as a variety of stories dealing with the supernatural, he also wrote essays specifically devoted to the examinations of this topic, including *Spiritismo?* (Catania: Giannotta, 1884) and *Mondo occulto* (Naples: Piero, 1896). Emilio De Marhi (1851-1901) was a popular Milanese writer. He is generally considered a follower of Manzoni and French naturalism, who saw literature as a vehicle for moral and spiritual



Both De Marchi and Capuana are interested in depicting the mental struggles of people who resort to murder for various motives – money, self-affirmation, jealousy – but then are somehow forced to confess the crime. Although these novels do not resort to a first person narrator, with its inherent confessional nature and direct focalisation on the protagonist, they are portraits of murderers and accurate studies of their psyche, which is always centre stage. The utilisation of the inverted structure – the culprit is known from the beginning of the story and the reader waits for the repercussions to be revealed – is a way of generating suspense and making the readers experience the warped world-view of the protagonist. As in typical examples of psychological thrillers, in which treacherous confusions of the role of the protagonist from one to another constitute key structural elements, in these two novels the main characters are initially depicted as hunters, but they suddenly turn into the hunted when an investigation begins and the fear of discovery builds within them.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, their ill-fated relationship with society generates the themes of alienation and entrapment that eventually culminate in their tragic psychic demise.<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, these are not, as most scholars claim, detective stories, for detection plays a very small part in plot construction.<sup>22</sup> In *Il cappello del prete* exponents of the

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improvement. He exists outside of the literary mainstream; as a proponent and eventual reformer of the Italian *romanzo d'appendice*, he operated within the Milanese journalistic market directed towards a mass readership. He escapes classification as a *verista*, *decadentista*, or even as a *scapigliato*, although attributes of each exist in his works. His novels carry a moral weight because of his own convictions as a modern Catholic, open to progress and theories of evolution, but nonetheless still attempting to convey morally edifying messages in his literary works in addition to his exploration of the psychological quandaries of the *fin de siècle* individual. Many of his other novels hearken back towards the *scapigliatura*, recalling their denouncement of the status quo, dissatisfaction with the Italian literary scene, and their tendencies to expose the complexities of human existence.

<sup>20</sup> See Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* has been excluded from crime fiction studies, while *Il cappello del prete* occupies a seminal position in the canon. Folco Portinari has defined it as a pure 'giallo', while Luca Crovi and Loris Rambelli have identified it as the true founder of what would become

judicial system appear only towards the end of the novel. In ‘L’assassinio di via Belpoggio’ the police are pushed into the background until the final scene, when a couple of officers burst into Giorgio’s house, while in *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* they are virtually absent. I thus contend that these constitute embryonic forms of psychological thriller, in which the focus on the emotional life of the transgressor moves them so far towards their Gothic side that the typical aspects of the rational detective story are inevitably overshadowed and undermined.

*Il cappello del prete*, set in Naples, was originally published in instalments both in Milan in 1887 in the journal *L’Italia del popolo* and in Naples in the *Corriere di Napoli*, before being collected into a volume the following year.<sup>23</sup> De Marchi was certainly influenced by the story of count Alessandro Faella, who in 1881 had killed a priest to steal his money, was arrested, and then committed suicide in prison without having confessed his crime. The case provoked a scandal and generated enormous media attention that resulted in several popular and more serious publications, including Lombroso’s and Ferri’s scientific study of the murderer.<sup>24</sup> De Marchi reworked this case and used it as a starting point for examining the psychology of the baron Carlo Coriolano di Santafusca, a vicious individual, a libertine and an atheist who is in dire financial straits, having mortgaged his property and borrowed from his tenants to pay for his gambling habits. He persuades a usurer priest to buy his family property but then kills him to steal the money he brings with him for the sale. Yet shortly after, he realises he

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the Italian school of detective fiction. For Barbara Pezzotti, it is ‘unanimously recognized as the first Italian detective novel ever published’. Folco Portinari, ‘De Marchi’, *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Turin: Utet, 1992), pp. 146-51. Rambelli, ‘Il presunto giallo italiano: dalla preistoria alla storia’, p. 32. Crovi, *Tutti i colori del giallo*, p. 33. Barbara Pezzotti, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> Emilio De Marchi, *Il cappello del prete* [1888] (Cava de’ Tirreni: Avegliano, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Ferri, *Su A. Faella e sugli osteomi e le cardiopatie negli alienati* (Turin: Loescher, 1882).

has left a crucial piece of evidence at the crime scene: the priest's hat. He immediately tries to seize the hat and get rid of it, but the hat that he manages to get hold of and destroy – by throwing it into the sea – turns out to be the wrong one. When the examining magistrate summons the baron to discuss the case and shows him the real hat, the criminal loses his self-control and confesses to the murder.

The genesis of *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* is traceable to the early 1880s, but the novel was eventually serialised in the journal *L'ora* only in 1900 and published the following year.<sup>25</sup> The protagonist of the novel, set in post-unification rural Sicily, is the marquis Antonio Schirardi, an uncultivated, feudal despot, the naturalistic product of an age of transition, torn between conflicting feudal and bourgeois impulses. The marquis was raised as noble with strict models of aristocratic behaviour such as the baroness of Lagomorto, his father, and his grandfather. Yet the key figures in his sentimental and social development were peasants, including his nurse and caretaker Mamma Grazia, the young and beautiful Agrippina, and the faithful servant Rocco. A conflict of identity therefore becomes inevitable. After ten years with Agrippina, he succumbs to the pressure of the family to eliminate subaltern influences and to suppress his attraction and affection to her. He thus decides to arrange what is supposed to be a contrived marriage between Agrippina and Rocco. After a while, though, the marquis begins to fear that Rocco has seduced Agrippina and, devoured by jealousy, suddenly kills him. After the murder, he attempts to fully embrace the aristocratic dynamic by taking the noble-born Zòsima as his wife. The marquis cannot, however, entirely recapture the aristocratic identity of his grandfather's generation and put everything behind. Although he initially allows another man to be charged and convicted for the murder in his place, when he finds out that he

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<sup>25</sup> Curiously, *L'ora* published twenty-two instalments, which corresponded to twenty-two of the twenty-four chapters of the novel. Capuana first refers to *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* in February 1881 in a letter to Verga. See Lina Perroni and Vito Perroni, 'Storia de *I Malavoglia*', *Nuova Antologia*, 408 (1940), 105-31, 237-51 (pp. 129-30).

has died in prison, his position, his integrity as well as his sanity begin to unravel.

Both figures of criminals are particularly complex, multifaceted, and certainly more contradictory than generally acknowledged by scholars. Their trajectory of crime and punishment, as we shall see, can be traced to a certain extent to a conflict between an elusive and ultimately unreplicable feudal ideology and repressed Christian values, which resurface through the form of retributive ghosts. In my analysis, however, I will also take into account the often overlooked element of moral insanity. Both authors place much emphasis on madness, a motif that should not be minimised, as it turns out to be helpful in obtaining a larger and more detailed picture of the criminals' psyches.

What clearly emerges in the novels is that the two main characters have absolutely no intention of turning themselves in because they are not willing to compromise their reputation and, in particular, cannot accept that their noble lineage be associated with a violent crime. It is revealing, as Sergia Adamo points out, that De Marchi and Capuana set their novels in Southern Italy in a period in which the members of the aristocracy did not intend to comply with the social and political changes that the new-born state was experiencing.<sup>26</sup> In a way, the representation of these criminals responds to the authors' most pressing cultural and socio-political concerns, including the problem of class difference in Southern Italy and the abusive role of the aristocracy. Both the baron and the marquis feel legitimised to elude the human law, and share the feudal assumptions about the right to kill. In this respect, the authors seem to betray a fear of the possibility of the continued domination of an adaptable nobility. In these texts, the villain, as in the early Gothic, takes the form of the vicious nobleman, a parasite, the residual trace of a

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<sup>26</sup> Adamo, 'Mondo giudiziario e riscrittura narrativa in Italia dopo l'Unità', p. 85.

past that still infests the country and prevents its attempts at modernisation.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the relatively minimal presence of the police allows both Capuana and De Marchi to construct a strong critique of the Italian legal system and its injustices. In *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* an innocent man is wrongly incarcerated and dies in prison, while in *Il cappello del prete* the examining magistrate questions the baron without knowing he might have been actually involved in the case. Instead, it is the lawyer Don Ciccio Scuotto who is presented as a cleverer sleuth by the narrator – ‘uomo fino, tenace, nemico dei giornali liberali e dei tempi scellerati’ – and it is through his words that De Marchi stigmatises the Italian justice system, the influence of the media in the legal processes, and the superficial way in which murder investigations are generally conducted.<sup>28</sup> ‘A don Ciccio non pareva vero che tutto il gran processo [...] dovesse finire come una bolla di sapone. Secondo lui le cose erano state condotte pessimamente, col solito sistema bislacco delle procedure nostre, con troppo intervento dei giornalisti, con troppo pettegolezzo’.<sup>29</sup>

In both novels human justice is then finally frustrated and though the two criminals cannot ultimately escape their fate, it is because of a sudden yet implacable breakdown that unmasks them. The reasons that lie behind their final losses of sanity are controversial. A considerable part of the critical debate has focused on the protagonists’ remorse, and the nature of guilt constitutes the most debated motif of these novels. Alessandra Briganti affirms that the principal and most explicit model of *Il cappello del prete* is Dostoevsky, for the pivotal theme of the novel is precisely ‘il rimorso’, which

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<sup>27</sup> Capuana’s novel contains strongly autobiographical material. I am especially referring to his relationship with a former household servant. She was married off to another man after having borne the author’s several children, who were subsequently relegated to the orphanage at Caltagirone. In this respect, it could even be argued that Capuana locates deviancy and monstrosity within himself.

<sup>28</sup> De Marchi, *Il cappello del prete*, p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

would function, in De Marchi's view, as a 'prova dell'esistenza dell'anima'.<sup>30</sup> For Fabio Pierangeli, the novel pivots on the protagonist's 'lotta con il rimorso e il senso di colpa' and sees the final sequence as the result of his 'desiderio inconscio di confessarsi ad una autorità istituzionale'.<sup>31</sup> Ettore Caccia defines *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* as 'il dramma del rimorso – il rimorso che gli sconvolge l'animo [...] e porta alla pazzia', while for Angelo Piero Cappello 'il dramma intimo del marchese' resides 'nei due sentimenti del rimorso del delitto commesso e della paura di essere scoperto'.<sup>32</sup> For Carlo Madrignani, Capuana renounces positivist psychopathology for a nebulous 'dramma di coscienza', and explains the marquis's descent into madness as a consequence of the ethical remorse triggered by the crime.<sup>33</sup>

As Peter Brooks maintains, the notion that possible redemption depends on confession is deeply ingrained in our culture, and Raskolnikov's choice of confession and expiation in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* still holds much power.<sup>34</sup> But, while Raskolnikov's choice of confession brings punishment, penance, and ultimately atonement, as Dostoevsky suggests at the end of the novel, in De Marchi's and Capuana's texts there is no space for redemption. Although the marquis and the baron occasionally

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<sup>30</sup> Alessandra Briganti, *Introduzione a De Marchi* (Roma: Laterza, 1992), pp. 110, 111. Likewise, for Rambelli the novel is 'una parabola, un apologo. Il tessuto moralistico è evidente; più che la storia di un delitto, è una storia di castigo e di espiazione'. Rambelli, *Storia del giallo italiano*, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Fabio Pierangeli, *Emilio De Marchi. Condanna e perdono* (Naples: Paolo Loffredo Editore, 2018) p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> Ettore Caccia, 'Luigi Capuana', in *Letteratura italiana. I Minori*, 4 vols (Milan: Marzorati, 1962), IV, p. 2908. Angelo Piero Cappello, *Invito alla lettura di Luigi Capuana* (Milan: Mursia, 1994), p. 123.

<sup>33</sup> 'il dramma del marchese è [...] una trasgressione che non va riportata all'uomo fisiologico, o alla società circostante, ma a una gamma di valori "eterni", che sono poi una sommatoria e generica morale cristiana nella visione laica della borghesia'. [...] La pazzia finale [ha il significato] di una vittoria dello spirito che riscatta le colpe sulla carne del peccatore e così lo salva'. Carlo Madrignani, *Capuana e il naturalismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1970), p. 271.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 112.

express feelings of guilt within their own thoughts, they fail to actively repent and consciously expiate their crime. They never make a conscious and legitimate confession to civil authorities because they never blame themselves. Unlike the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, the two noblemen are not looking for a motive, because they are perfectly aware of the motives behind their murders. The baron needed money, and believed that between him and the priest ‘si è combattuta la grande lotta per la vita. La vittoria, come sempre, fu del più forte, vedi Carlo Darwin’.<sup>35</sup> The fear to be caught terrifies him and progressively corrodes his mental sanity, but he never regrets to have disposed of the priest’s life. The marquis cannot seriously experience the pangs of remorse for having killed his most trusted servant who had betrayed him. In his feudalistic worldview, where the power of a nobleman is absolute, there is no room for such a treachery. Neither protagonists, then, take responsibility for their actions. For the baron, precisely like the marquis, confession is not, as Brooks suggests, ‘the way to contrition and to absolution, which permits a reintegration into the community of the faithful’.<sup>36</sup> Rather, it is the result of an implacable, endless persecution whose nature is entirely preternatural and makes the texts veer towards the terrain of the ghost-story.

Divine retribution constitutes an important subtext in these novels. In *Il cappello del prete* crime is still part and parcel of a Christian narrative whose inevitable conclusion is punishment. De Marchi stages a conflict between materialism, epitomised by the physician Panterre, to whom the baron refers every time his mental strength starts to vacillate, and divine power. As the baron initially says to himself using Panterre’s words, the conscience is merely ‘il lusso, l’eleganza dell’uomo felice’ and God is ‘una capocchia di spillo puntato nel cuscino del cielo’.<sup>37</sup> Yet such tension within the baron’s psyche

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<sup>35</sup> De Marchi, *Il cappello del prete*, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> De Marchi, *Il cappello del prete*, p. 45.

between human reason and supernaturalism cannot see the first prevailing: ‘troppo diseguale era la lotta tra un vivo e un morto [...] se uccidere un uomo significa farlo vivere più di prima; se nascondere in una cisterna vuol dire fare in modo che egli occupi di sé tutta una città [...] è segno che la ragione non è ragione.’<sup>38</sup> For a Catholic like De Marchi, who saw literature as a powerful instrument of edification, the man who throws a challenge to God must pay the highest price. The Milanese author, as testified by the figure of the avaricious priest, stood against the Church as a wealthy, largely corrupt political powerhouse. It is thus possible to see the retributive ghost of the priest, which comes back to life under the shape of his hat in order to haunt the criminal like a spectre, as a way of redeeming himself. In the afterlife, he turns into a divine tool, becoming a symbol of divine justice and the implacable wrath of God: ‘il cappello del prete si alzava dal mucchio, grande, nero, sozzo, peloso come un osceno pipistrello, come un fantasma accusatore’.<sup>39</sup> The ghostly persecution is subtle yet incessant – ‘era uno spavento, un castigo, un tormento insopportabile di sentire qualcuno che camminava, incalzava dietro le spalle e di non poter fermare quel fantasma’ – and has the final effect of leading the baron to his psychic demise.<sup>40</sup>

The marquis’s reaction following the murder is more complex and contradictory than that of the baron, but in some ways we still find a conflict between human reason and the supernatural. He voraciously reads books on scientific materialism in the attempt to exorcise his fears of the dreadful afterlife as depicted by Catholicism. Yet he also contradictorily uses religious stances as tools for justifying his actions and healing his conscience: ‘se Dio intanto aveva permesso che costui fosse condannato, voleva dire probabilmente che gli pesava addosso qualche altro grave delitto rimasto occulto’.<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 200-1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> Luigi Capuana, *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* [1901] (Perugia: Guerra Edizioni, 1996), p. 73.



fear of God's punishment, though, never stops haunting him. As Annamaria Pagliaro suggests, rather than concentrating on the representation of an ethical remorse, Capuana focuses on the depiction of a psychological state in which 'domina un senso di aver trasgredito un comandamento religioso fondamentale e, conseguentemente, la paura di una vendetta divina derivante da questa trasgressione'.<sup>42</sup> Saved from suicide by Agrippina, the marquis experiences a moment of religious dread. Stored in his dark and malodorous cellar, he discovers a carving of Christ on the Cross: 'nel salire le scale gli sembrava che quegli occhi semispeniti continuassero a guardarlo attraverso la spessezza dei muri, e che quelle livide labbra contratte dalla suprema convulsione dell'agonia si agitassero, forse, per gridargli dietro qualche terribile parola!'.<sup>43</sup> The author implies here that the marquis, in spite of his own desecrations, has always lacked the sacrilegious calm of his forebears. The image of the sacrificed Christ does not, as Paul Barnaby suggests, remind the marquis of his blame, but rather symbolises the revenge of his repressed Catholic education, and it is a transparent cipher of his fear of divine punishment.<sup>44</sup> It is true that this symbolic resurrection drives him to confess his guilt to Don Silvio, but it is also true that when the priest refuses to absolve him, the conscience of the marquis seems entirely appeased: a more indulgent priest, he believes, would have ordered private penance, and the act of confession has certainly placated God.

Another crucial yet often neglected element that contributes to the marquis's breakdown pertains once again to the supernatural world. His friend and lawyer, Don Aquilante, is a spiritualist, and tells him that he is in touch with the spirit of the dead man and is about to discover who the real perpetrator is. Although Don Aquilante is repeatedly

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<sup>42</sup> Annamaria Pagliaro, 'Il marchese di Roccaverdina di Luigi Capuana: crisi etica o analisi positivista?', *Italian Studies*, 52.1 (1997), 111-30 (p. 114).

<sup>43</sup> Capuana, *Il marchese di Roccaverdina*, p. 62.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Barnaby, 'Il marchese di Roccaverdina: Myth, History, and Hagiography in Post-Risorgimento Sicily', *Italian Studies*, 55.1 (2000), 99-120 (p. 108).

ridiculed by the other characters, the narrator suggests that the victim, precisely like the priest in *Il cappello del prete*, is haunting the marquis from the afterlife like a ghost. Not only does Rocco visit the marquis's dreams, but his presence is continuously perceived and even seen at the crime scene. On one occasion, Don Aquilante says that he has sensed the presence of Rocco, who 'si è fermato presso il ponticello ed è rimasto un istante in ascolto'.<sup>45</sup> One of the peasants goes as far as to say that he even saw, in the same place in which Rocco was killed, the sudden apparition from the ground of a man and his mule, both of which vanished almost immediately into thin air.<sup>46</sup> Fear of unknown, vengeful ghosts constitutes a fundamental factor that condemns the marquis to a state of social alienation and existential disorientation. Persecution metamorphoses into possession when, talking to himself with a voice 'simile a [quella di] un terribile misterioso fantasma', one night he cries out:<sup>47</sup>

“Eh? Ti sarebbe piaciuto che Dio non esistesse! Ti sarebbe piaciuto che l'anima non fosse immortale! Hai tolto la vita a una creatura umana, hai fatto morire in carcere un innocente, e volevi goderti in pace la vita quasi non avessi operato niente di male! Ma lo hai visto: c'è stato sempre qualcuno che ha tenuto sveglia in fondo al tuo cuore il rimorso [...] E questo qualcuno non si arresterà, non si stancherà, finché tu non abbia pagato il tuo debito, finché tu non abbia espiato anche quaggiù!”<sup>48</sup>

The marquis has now lost his rationality and begins to live in a complete hallucinatory state. One night, he takes his rifle and goes to where the homicide was committed,

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<sup>45</sup> Capuana, *Il marchese di Roccaverdina*, p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

shooting and screaming to the ghost of the victim, and inevitably confessing his crime.

As we have seen, there is a complex interplay between different factors that eventually lead to the criminals' madness. Insanity itself, which constitutes a key component of the psychological thriller, plays such a major part throughout both texts that its role should be discussed more in depth. There are strong grounds, I believe, for looking into the possibility of moral insanity as a pathological phenomenon that motivates, to a certain extent, the crimes.<sup>49</sup> In *Il cappello del prete*, the baron is described from the very beginning of the novel as a vicious man who regularly commits anti-social activities. He is an atheist, a gambler, a libertine, perhaps even an alcoholic, and, most of all, a cold-blooded murderer. Although the narrator does never touch upon the possibility of an innate predisposition to criminality, it is undeniable that the baron is in many ways a serious and habitual offender. It would thus be superficial to classify him, in Lombrosian terms, merely as an occasional delinquent. It is true that this typology of criminal does not exhibit any sort of degenerative anomaly, usually commits its initial offence later in life and always for some adequate reason: occasional delinquents, for Lombroso, carry a hidden predisposition to crime that certain conditions, particularly external circumstances, abruptly activate.<sup>50</sup> Though it is also true that occasional delinquents tend

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<sup>49</sup> The concept of insanity is here used in the sense of moral insanity, a notion originally coined by the British physician James Cowles Prichard (1786-1848), who defines it as a 'madness consisting in a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the interest or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucinations'. James Cowles, Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (London: Sherwood Gilbert, 1835), p. 12. In Italy, diverse interpretative frameworks about the congenital or acquired nature of moral insanity coexisted. For Lombroso, moral insanity is a constitutional anomaly. See Cesare Lombroso, 'Identità dell'epilessia colla pazzia morale e delinquenza congenita', *Archivio di psichiatria, scienze penali, ed antropologia criminale* 6 (1885), 1-28.

<sup>50</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente studiato in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale, ed alle discipline carcerarie*, 3 vols (Turin: Bocca, 1889), II, p. 427. See also Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alla psichiatria*, 3 vols (Turin: Bocca, 1897), II, pp. 542-3.

to openly and consciously confess their misdeeds: this is precisely what distinguishes them from born-criminals.<sup>51</sup> The baron, instead, keeps his murder concealed as long as his mental strength allows him to do, and tends to justify his act as necessary in the struggle for life that, in Darwinian terms, constitutes the essence of our world.

Lombroso, when it comes to that typology of criminal that he defines as ‘pazzo morale’, claims that these delinquents believe to have the right to kill: such ‘delirio di grandezza’ makes them believe to be ‘superiori ad ogni altro, li fa sorpassare su ogni riguardo e non veder gli ostacoli’.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in his analysis of the ‘delinquente pazzo’, Lombroso stresses that ‘in molti omicidi pazzi, si ha quella mancanza di rimorso, che è pure negli omicidi nati’.<sup>53</sup> As I have underlined above, Lombroso’s criminology is not systematic, and these definitions are loose, volatile, poorly articulated, and often self-contradictory. What I intend to draw attention to, though, is that the notion of moral insanity underlies all these different categories of criminals. The word ‘pazzia’ recurs several times throughout *Il cappello del prete*, and seems to indicate the presence of a psychosis that gradually progresses, culminates in the act of murder and continues after the crime has occurred. After having committed the murder, the baron hoped that ‘Napoli lo vedesse sano’, implying that the homicide might have accentuated a process of deterioration of the mind that was already in action.<sup>54</sup> Before speaking to the magistrate, devoured by the seed of the doubt, he asks himself whether ‘non era da uomo pazzo il soffrir tanto per una sì meschina contingenza’.<sup>55</sup> It is thus possible to argue that the conversation with the magistrate has intensified and eventually brought to light a latent

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<sup>51</sup> See Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alla psichiatria*, II, p. 539n.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., II, p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., II, pp. 318-9.

<sup>54</sup> De Marchi, *Il cappello del prete*, p. 135.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

form of mental illness. The body of the baron is ultimately betrayed by his own destabilised psyche, and it is only when he realises his entrapment that he starts revealing the truth in a ‘furioso delirio, mentre legato come un toro che si trae al macello, dibattevasi nelle convulsioni di una pazzia spaventosa’.<sup>56</sup>

Remaining within the complicated and often inconsistent Lombrosian framework, the baron might be categorised as a ‘delinquente pazzo’, also due to the premeditation of the crime. As the criminologist remarks, ‘la premeditazione non è molte volte [...] che l’effetto di quella coesistenza e sovrapposizione di più delirii nello stesso individuo [...] e per la quale avviene che la premeditazione di un omicidio sia l’effetto di un delirio cronico e l’esecuzione invece lo sia di un impulse più o meno vertiginoso’.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, we could also look at the baron as a ‘reo-latente’, a sort of confused combination between the occasional delinquent and the born-criminal. It is illuminating that Lombroso inserts in this section examples of wealthy aristocrats with a natural predisposition to criminal behaviours who are able to avoid prison only thanks to their social status: ‘così come vi è il reo d’occasione, così vi è quello che nato delinquente non si manifesta tale perché gli manca l’occasione, o perché la ricchezza o la potenza gli diedero modo di soddisfare i pravi istinti senza urtare nel codice’.<sup>58</sup> The baron would coherently be described, in this respect, as a habitual offender affected by some kind of psychosis who uses his social status to deliberately act as if he were above the human law. There is, ultimately, no unambiguous classification of the baron’s criminal profile, whose composite character mirrors the varied and conflicting nature of contemporary assumptions on criminality. The presence of a latent form of madness at the basis of the crime should not, in any case, be ruled out.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>57</sup> Lombroso, *L’uomo delinquente in rapporto all’antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alla psichiatria*, II, p. 308.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., II, p. 549.

The case of the marquis is perhaps more intricate, but we can follow the same path. On the surface, he seems to constitute an example of the criminal of passion. For Lombroso, like occasional criminals, criminals of passion respond to circumstances, rather than to organic conditions. Their principal motive resides in 'l'adulterio o la fiducia tradita'.<sup>59</sup> They act on impulse, driven by overwhelming rage, love, or offended honour, and ultimately regret their acts and spontaneously confess.<sup>60</sup> The marquis's final confession, though, as we saw, is far from spontaneous. In addition, Lombroso draws a line between criminals of passion and other various types of insane criminals on the basis of their lifestyle and moral integrity: 'l'onestà della vita anteriore, il rapido pentimento, la causa gravissima, tracciano una differenza nettissima coi delitti ispirati dalle passioni, anche non ignobili, ai delinquenti abituali, che ne portano nella faccia e nel cranio e nella trista loro storia anteriore tutta l'impronta'.<sup>61</sup> The behaviour of the marquis during his life, as we saw, was instead certainly not irreproachable. Finally, Capuana's friendship with, and admiration for, Lombroso and his criminological work presuppose a more advanced and sophisticated utilisation of the criminologist's theories of crime.<sup>62</sup> Mario Zangara, who considers the protagonist's actions as typical of family traditions in a feudal society and regards his remorse as a reaction to the endangerment of his noble name, perceptively suggests in the final line of his analysis that the confession of the marquis is

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., II, p. 214.

<sup>60</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, giurisprudenza e alle discipline carcerarie* (Turin: Bocca, 1878), p. 106. See also Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente studiato in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale, ed alle discipline carcerarie*, II, p. 126.

<sup>61</sup> Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente studiato in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale, ed alle discipline carcerarie*, II, p. 222.

<sup>62</sup> Lombroso and Capuana began an association that was to endure for the remainder of Lombroso's life in 1884, when the criminologist wrote to the novelist two letters commending him for *Spiritismo?* that had just appeared. They soon became friends, frequently exchanging ideas on both science and literature. See Corrado Di Blasi, *Luigi Capuana: originale e segreto* (Catania: Giannotta, 1968), p. 151.

also determined by ‘cause oscure di carattere prevalentemente cerebrale e fisiologico’.<sup>63</sup> Annamaria Cavalli-Pasini cites Lombroso’s influence on Capuana but claims that madness is only ‘oscuramente’ at the origins of the murder, ‘essendo l’abbandono agli istinti deteriori che conduce l’uomo alla morte psichica’.<sup>64</sup> The possibility that some kind of psychosis might be at the basis of the marquis’s deviant behaviour is not unfounded.

To begin with, there are at least two visible clues provided by the writer that implies the presence of madness running through the veins of the marquis’ family. The baroness once affirms that ‘noi Roccaverdina siamo, chi più chi meno, col cervello bacato’, while Don Pietro acknowledges that ‘i Roccaverdina sono stati sempre uno più matto dell’altro; e il marchese non dirazza’.<sup>65</sup> Throughout the book, the marquis does not undergo a significant evolution. In fact, as Judith Davies underlines, he is ‘in essence psychologically static’.<sup>66</sup> His mental instability, therefore, predates the beginning of the novel, and emerges distinctly way before its conclusion, where the marquis definitively loses his sanity and reveals the truth. As he tells the priest, the homicide was committed impulsively and out of a ferocious jealousy that temporarily makes him lose his reason: ‘ero pazzo’, he fearfully acknowledges, ‘in quella terribile notte!’.<sup>67</sup> This temporary moment of insanity must be seen as part and parcel of the man’s unstable mind, which has been repeatedly eroded over the years by the enduring and unbearable jealousy for Agrippina, a ‘pensiero fisso’ that gradually turns into a pathological form of monomania:

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<sup>63</sup> Mario Zangara, *Luigi Capuana* (Catania: La Navicella, 1964), p. 68. According to him, ‘il delitto è concepito dal Marchese come una reazione, eccessiva certo e riprovevole, dall’offesa subita dal suo orgoglio che non sorge soltanto dallo spirito tortuoso e duro della gelosia ma da egoismo dispotico inerente al prestigio della casta’. Zangara, *Luigi Capuana*, p. 61.

<sup>64</sup> Pasini, *La scienza del romanzo*, p. 119.

<sup>65</sup> Capuana, *Il marchese di Roccaverdina*, pp. 35, 121.

<sup>66</sup> Judith Davies, *The Realism of Luigi Capuana: Theory and Practice in the Development of Late Nineteenth-Century Italian Narrative* (Cambridge: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1979), p. 146.

<sup>67</sup> Capuana, *Il marchese di Roccaverdina*, p. 66.

as the marquis admits, the woman should be ‘o tutta mia, o né mia né di altri!’. For him, it is a ‘pensiero fisso che mi ribolliva nel cervello, e mi offuscava la ragione’.<sup>68</sup> At the end of the novel, the *Cavalier* Pergola recognises that the marquis ‘da più giorni si lagnava di una trafittura al cervello, di un chiodo, diceva, conficcato nella fronte. Il male ha lavorato, lavorato sottomano’.<sup>69</sup> He validates the diagnosis of the physician La Greca, asserting that the marquis’s downward spiral into madness constitutes a direct consequence of ‘esquilibri di nervi, sconvolgimento di cervello prodotto dal pensiero fisso, fisso sempre su la stessa idea’.<sup>70</sup> In the portrayal of the marquis as a criminal mind, the interplay between crime and madness, with the difficulty of plainly stating what triggers what, appears with great clarity. Appropriating again a Lombrosian terminology, the protagonist of *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* could be classified as a ‘pazzo morale’ affected by ‘tendenze istintive infrenabili’, whose ‘pervertita affettività’ compels him to commit a murder in the grip of a ‘forza irresistibile’.<sup>71</sup>

This categorisation is, once again, inevitably partial. Both criminals resist scientific systematisation, and their portrayal is more the result of a complex and heterogeneous blending of diverse formulations than the product of a single, straightforward view of criminal behaviour. This is partly the obvious consequence of being fictional characters, but it also mirrors the manifold nature of late nineteenth-century criminology and its inability to provide coherent formulations. On the one hand, then, the two writers seem to locate responsibility in acts and consequences, establishing a close relationship between free will, responsibility, and punishment, thus apparently contesting deterministic views of criminal behaviour. A closer look at the texts, though, has revealed

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<sup>68</sup> Capuana, *Il marchese di Roccaverdina*, p. 69.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>71</sup> Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale, ed alle discipline carcerarie*, I, pp. 623, 619.



the centrality of the concept of moral insanity that remains ultimately deeply problematic, for it undermines the role of external factors and weakens the idea of remorse, opening up to a variety of different interpretations.<sup>72</sup>

### 3.2 Monsters and Sexual Serial Killers

Although the underlying moral insight of the texts I have analysed is that murderous potential can lurk in everyman, by giving their murderers a motive to kill, De Marchi and Capuana, as well as Svevo, suggest that there is a dividing-line between being an evil human being and being a wicked and ruthless monster. This does not mean that the latter typology is absent in *fin-de-siècle* literature. The case of Gabriele D'Annunzio is emblematic.<sup>73</sup> In *Giovanni Episcopo* (1891), the protagonist is a humble, workday Roman clerk whose life is suddenly turned upside down when he meets Giulio Wanzer, a personification of viciousness and sadism, who sets about manipulating and dominating him. While Giulio disappears after having stolen money from the Treasury, Giovanni marries Ginevra, a faithless woman of loose morals, an element that leaves the paternity of their son, Ciro, in doubt. Years later, Wanzer resurfaces and begins carrying on with Ginevra in front of Ciro, leading a deranged Episcopo to brutally murder the nefarious criminal. This novel, which displays perfect reproductions of Lombrosian criminals – Wanzer is a born-criminal; Episcopo the occasional delinquent; Ginevra the archetypal

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<sup>72</sup> There is an obvious relationship in *Crime and Punishment* between free will, responsibility, and blame that Lombroso and Ferri deliberately and cunningly refuse to take into consideration. As Jeanne Gaakeer points out, 'it would seem that Lombroso and his followers usurped Dostoevsky and adapted him to their own purposes when they depicted him as the painter of atavism'. Jeanne Gaakeer, 'The Art to Find the Mind's Construction in the Face. Lombroso's Criminal Anthropology and Literature: The Examples of Zola, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy', *Cardozo Law Review*, 26.6 (May 2005), 2345-77 (p. 2369).

<sup>73</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) was a poet, journalist, and novelist generally associated with the Decadent movement. He occupies a prominent place in Italian literature and culture between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

prostitute – is also remarkable, being written from Episcopo's point of view in the first person while speaking to an invisible interlocutor. This enigmatic figure is most likely a criminologist who is interrogating Episcopo not with the intent of establishing his guilt – we learn early on that he was discovered with a knife in hand over the victim's corpse – but in the attempt to obtain a complete picture of the physical and mental makeup of such an intriguing murderer.

Another classic example is *L'innocente* (1892), which consists of Tullio Hermil's confession of the murder of his wife's illegitimate infant son and an account of the events leading up to the killing. *L'innocente* is arguably D'Annunzio's most Lombrosian work, extensively analysed by Ferri in *I delinquenti nell'arte*, where the criminologist describes Hermil as a pure born-criminal, a 'man of genius' convinced of his intellectual and moral superiority who feels that his every action is beyond reproach, finding its justification in his exceptional nature.<sup>74</sup> Although sexuality constitutes a great concern in D'Annunzian output, the protagonist of this novel, who reveals the kind of moral insensitivity and total lack of remorse that typically connote the born-criminal, cannot be described as a sexual monster. This category was, though, under increasing scrutiny in those years.

The figure of the monster, around which, as Foucault explains, the problematic question of abnormality was largely set out in the early nineteenth century, particularly with regard to those crimes that appeared completely irrational and motiveless, progressively linked up with the figure of the sexual deviant towards the *fin-de-siècle*.<sup>75</sup> In these years, growing importance is attributed to the universality of sexual deviance, which 'emerges as the root, foundation, and general etiological principle of most other

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<sup>74</sup> Ferri, *I delinquenti nell'arte*, p. 153.

<sup>75</sup> Michel Foucault, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*, trans. by Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 62, 60.

forms of abnormality'.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, towards the end of the century, in Italy with the two murders committed by Vincenzo Verzeni between 1869 and 1871, in Germany, to be precise in Bochum, where Wilhelm Schiff raped, killed and then mutilated three women between 1878 and 1882, and in Great Britain with Jack the Ripper's six gruesome, unsolved murders of prostitutes in Whitechapel in 1888, the most excessive form of crime, serial killing, often sexually motivated, entered the Gothic repertoire.<sup>77</sup>

Sexual murders had strong resonance throughout Europe, and, inevitably, the figure of the sexual serial killer emerged in extraordinarily different forms of discourse and practice, including literature.<sup>78</sup> As Abigail Lee Six and Hannah Thompson have shown, increasing interest in sexology was one of the factors that changed the way in which monstrosity was depicted in late nineteenth-century literature: rather than focusing on the story of the monster's suffering and the impact that monstrosity has on the afflicted character, *fin-de-siècle* texts 'are interested in the causes of physical or moral monstrosity and their ramifications for society more generally'.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>77</sup> As well-know, serial murder is a new term, originally coined in the early 1980s when the FBI launched a large-scale initiative at its training academy in Quantico, Virginia, to document, study, and investigate repeat killers, classifying multiple homicides into mass, spree, and serial murders. In 2005, the FBI's renamed Behavioural Analysis Unit forged a discussion of the definition of serial murder, which is now 'the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s) in separate events'. James Alan Fox and Jack Levin, *Extreme Killing. Understanding Serial and Mass Murder* (SAGE: Los Angeles, 2015), p. 25.

<sup>78</sup> The murders of Jack the Ripper had a strong resonance in Italy. Various booklets focusing on this serial killer appeared in this period, including *Jack l'assassino di Londra detto lo sventratore di donne* (Florence: Salani, 1888), republished in 1901 as *Jack, lo sventratore di Londra. Racconto storico* (Florence: Salani, 1901), and *Jack lo sventratore di donne a Londra* (Codogno: Cairo, 1891). Daniele Oberto Marrama's 'Il compagno di viaggio', a short-story that appeared in the 29<sup>th</sup> issue of *La domenica del Corriere* of 1905 is an enjoyable parody of Jack the Ripper's murders that testifies to the long-lasting fascination with this historical figure. Daniele Oberto Marrama (1874-1912) was a Neapolitan journalist and writer who collaborated with journals such as *Il mattino*, *La settimana*, and *Il giorno*. He wrote several short stories for *La domenica del Corriere* that combine crime, supernatural, and detective elements. These texts were then collected in the volume *Il ritratto del morto. Racconti bizzarri* (Naples: Perrella, 1907), which appeared with the preface of Matilde Serao.

<sup>79</sup> Abigail Lee Six and Hannah Thompson, 'From Hideous to Hedonist: The Changing Face of the Nineteenth-Century Monster', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the*

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Italian crime fiction offers some interesting texts that present the figure of the sexual monster. A noteworthy example is the protagonist of the forgotten novel *La moralità del male* (1906), written by Ugo de Amicis, who takes the reader vicariously through a variety of anti-social activities, including rape and murder, which are committed without any remorse only to satisfy the most inner sexual desires: ‘confesso le mie follie, le malvagie opere, gl’incendi, gli stupri, gli omicidi, l’immenso amore che trema in ogni mia fibra, e l’impulso generoso del mio essere, che mi spinge alla confessione’.<sup>80</sup>

In this section, I intend to provide a close-reading of another obscure text, the short story ‘L’ossessione rossa’, written by the journalist and politician Giuseppe Bevione and originally published in the journal *La Lettura* in 1906.<sup>81</sup> Narrated in the first person, this is a powerfully Gothic psychological-thriller in which nothing can mediate the warped perceptions of the narrator and the horror of his crime. The focus is exclusively placed on the criminal, who engages in a violent struggle with the destructive impulses of his own mind that eventually leads to the murder. According to the preface, the story contains the manuscript of the confessions written in prison by the criminal Michele Songina, sentenced to death for murder and then executed. These confessions have been collected and then published by a friend of the director of the prison who is particularly interested

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*Monstrous*, ed. by Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 237-55 (p. 248).

<sup>80</sup> Ugo de Amicis, *La moralità del male* (Turin: Renzo Streglio, 1906), p. 5. Ugo De Amicis (1879-1962) was the son of the better-known Edmondo, and produced a variety of texts that include novels, short-stories, and anecdotes. *La moralità del male*, an insightful inquiry into the terrain of the psyche, is arguably his most intriguing novel.

<sup>81</sup> Giuseppe Bevione, ‘L’ossessione rossa’, *La lettura*, 6.2 (1906), 118-25. Reprinted in *Ottocento nero italiano*, ed. by Claudio Gallo and Luca Crovi (Milan: Nino Aragno Editore, 2009), pp. 401-14. Giuseppe Bevione (1879-1976) was an important figure in the political and journalistic climate of twentieth-century Italy. In 1923, after having converted to Fascism, he became director of the newspaper *Il secolo* and was then nominated senator. This short-story is one of his few incursions into the territory of literary fiction.

in the profiling of murderers, ‘perché imparassimo a temere l’oscura combinazione organica ch’è il nostro cervello’.<sup>82</sup> Unlike the novels analysed in the first section, then, in which the authors do not explicitly intend to provide answers about the origins of evil, Bevione aims to speculate in depth around the problem of the roots of criminal behaviour.

Michele presents all the characteristics of the serial killer: according to two profilers like Thomas K. Ressler and Thomas Shachtman, the typical motivational structure of a serial killer is founded on two basic themes, ‘the dominance of a fantasy life and a history of personal abuse’.<sup>83</sup> On the one hand, at the age of thirteen, when his father and mother were already dead, Michele began to be subjected to abuse and violence on the part of his stepmother: he stresses the ‘ire e le percosse della matrigna, la mancanza di libri e spesso del pane’.<sup>84</sup> He thus spent most of the time alone, which inevitably contributed to the deterioration of his already twisted mind. On the other hand, Michele explains how he was enormously obsessed with the colour red and, in particular, with blood. He describes in great detail the pleasure that the sight of blood coming out of a dead calf in a butcher’s shop gave him:

quando l’animale fu levato sulle carrucole, e nel collo gli fu piantata la larga lama arrossata, e il grosso flutto di sangue precipitò gorgogliando, io bevetti quella vista con le pupille dilatate, e provai come se un’onda di tiepida soavità mi avesse coperto e penetrato.<sup>85</sup>

The word ‘penetrated’ used in the passive form is only one of the many passages that

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 401.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas K. Ressler and Thomas Shachtman, *I Have Lived in the Monster* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>84</sup> Bevione, ‘L’ossessione rossa’, p. 403.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 403.

imply strong homosexual connotations. The *fin-de-siècle* is not only a time in which, as Derek Duncan puts it, ‘modern homosexuals were coming to the fore’, but also a period in which many medical writers such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis were increasingly paying attention to what they regarded as sexual pathologies, framing and feeding the discussion, and ultimately replacing the Church as the arbiter of sexual mores.<sup>86</sup> The basic assumption underlying much early sexological research was that individuals were not responsible for their sexual drives. Lombroso was a pioneer in this new field of inquiry, having started his research on what he called ‘pederasty’ in the early 1880s.<sup>87</sup> According to him, sexual inclinations are innate, and same-sex desires constitute a pathological condition and a form of mental illness akin to criminality. Through his use of atavism and degeneration theories, Lombroso conflates disease and crime, which became increasingly intertwined in Western medical and criminological thinking during the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>88</sup>

The predominant determinant attributed most sexual abnormalities to heredity and degeneration. Sexual deviants inherited anatomical or functional defects or at least the

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<sup>86</sup> Derek Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 20. Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) was a dominant figure in nineteenth-century psychiatry and a founder of the study of human sexuality. His seminal *Psychopathia Sexualis. Eine klinische-forensische Studie* (1886), which went through twelve editions after its initial appearance, investigates the relationship of various sex crimes to insanity, and largely influenced subsequent understanding of sexual deviancy. Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) was an English physician and social reformer who extensively studied human sexuality. His *The Criminal* (1890) served to spread Lombrosian ideas in Great Britain. The first volume of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, which was originally published in 1897, was devoted to sexual inversion.

<sup>87</sup> Lombroso began to publish his work in the field of sexual inversion in 1881, with a pioneering article entitled ‘L’amore nei pazzi’, *Archivio di psichiatria, antropologia criminale e scienze penali*, 2 (1881), 1-32. He includes eight case histories of sexual inversion, two of which were the result of his personal observations. The first (short-lived) scientific journal devoted entirely to sexual problems, *L’archivio delle psicopatie sessuali*, was founded in Italy in 1896 by the physician and criminologist Pasquale Penta (1859-1904).

<sup>88</sup> See Chiara Beccalossi, ‘Sexual Deviancies, Disease, and Crime in Cesare Lombroso and the “Italian School” of Criminal Anthropology’, in *Disease and Crime: A History of Social Pathologies and the New Politics of Health*, ed. by Robert Peckham (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 40-55 (pp. 41, 42).

predisposition to develop them.<sup>89</sup> According to Krafft-Ebing, homosexuality is a serious crime and a ‘functional sign of degeneration’, one that is usually accompanied by a ‘hereditary psychopathic taint’ and ‘psychological anomalies’.<sup>90</sup> In almost all cases, he maintains, ‘neuroses, psychoses, degenerative signs have been found in the families’.<sup>91</sup> This description perfectly fits Michele’s personality. He is indeed a degenerate being, whose propensity for committing crimes is explained by a combination of biological predisposition and socio-cultural influences. It is not surprising that the confession starts with the mention of the death of Michele’s mother, which happened when he was very young, and with his difficult relationship with his stepmother: ‘mio padre mi voleva bene e tuttavia mi diede una matrigna’.<sup>92</sup> He suggests that his mother was mentally disturbed, and it is possible to argue that this hereditary defect might have been transferred to him:

Molte volte però, durante la mia infanzia e la mia adolescenza, sentii dire, non dal papà, ma dagli zii, dalla matrigna e da altri del vicinato: – “Come Michele rassomiglia a sua mamma, negli occhi, nella bocca, nella fronte! Purché...” Qui abbassavano la voce, dicevano fra loro parole ch’io non comprendevo e mi guardavano con infinita pietà.<sup>93</sup>

When Michele starts practising as a barber in the barber’s shop of his stepfather, his sexual fantasies concerning blood become increasingly stronger. Initially, he limits himself to inflicting superficial wounds upon some of his clients, giving rise to

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<sup>89</sup> See Ashley, “*Misfits*” in *Fin De Siècle France and Italy*, p. 190.

<sup>90</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing *Psychopathia Sexualis* [1886], trans. by Francis J. Rebman (London: Aberdeen University Press and Rebman, 1899), pp. 326, 28.

<sup>91</sup> Krafft-Ebing *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 328.

<sup>92</sup> Bevione, ‘L’ossessione rossa’, p. 402.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

indescribable pleasure: ‘negli inizi del mio mestiere avveniva sovente che io per imperizia facessi qualche piccola ferita ai miei avventori, e il sangue naturalmente ne spicciava, portandomi la sua solita ineffabile felicità’.<sup>94</sup> Although he is initially able to ‘controbilanciare gli istinti anormali della mia creatura interna’ with his talent in the art of barbering, as time passes, his violent impulses prevail:

cedetti al demone, e cominciai a procurarmi *col mio mestiere, col mio rasoio* il perfido godimento [...] mi misi a regalare uno, due, tre piccoli tagli ai miei avventori [...] Mai nessuno se ne accorgeva [...] e nessuno, fuorché Dio, se mi vedeva, si accorgeva del mio dolce uragano interno.<sup>95</sup>

The serious fantasies about killing and drinking blood that Michele expresses eventually drive him to commit a murder. The victim, a duke, is described through strong sexual connotations – ‘possedeva due mandibole enormi che avrebbero sgretolato la coscia di un montone [...] due labbra umide, carnose’ – and he is defined as the ideal man: ‘era l’esaltazione del tipo che da anni cercavo, e che non avevo mai trovato, l’uomo ideale, il sangue perfetto, che doveva darmi tutta la gioia di cui sentivo capace la mia infermità’.<sup>96</sup> For Michele, the sadistic satisfaction seems initially to derive from the process of killing and not in the death. In inflicting small and subtle wounds upon the duke, he is highly sexually stimulated: ‘ebbi trasporti, ebbrezze, deliri, voli d’anima, gridi interiori tali, che nessun amante, nessun santo nella contemplazione di Dio ebbe mai’.<sup>97</sup>

One of the defining traits of serial killers is the objectification of the victim.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 406.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 406. Emphasis in the text.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 407.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 408.



According to Mark Seltzer, they expel their own interior state in the act of violence they inflict on the victim, which is given a 'symbolic value' that requires 'anonymity and abstractness'.<sup>98</sup> Unlike in the stories analysed before, where corpses are sanitised and essentially sacrificial, possessing a reassuring corporeal integrity, the body of the victim here is violated, abjected, grotesque, and gruesome. The selected victim is objectified and repeatedly called 'l'oggetto del mio amore', and the act of killing is described as an intense and long sexual experience: 'l'emozione [...] si faceva più viva e più bramosa in ogni attimo, e mi rendeva, come gli amanti, cupido ad ogni secondo di una più completa voluttà'.<sup>99</sup> It is when the duke has a fit of apoplexy and becomes paralytic that Michele is driven into the arms of evil. The realisation that he can exercise absolute power over the body of a man who is incapable of moving makes him cede to his destructive impulses. The scene of the murder is disturbingly Gothic in its extreme violence and its richness of gruesome details, with the killer describing literally how he ripped off the skin and then removed the eyes of his victim:

cominciai a raderlo, ma nella pelle e non più nei peli. Gli affondai il rasoio di due millimetri nel volto e gli trassi via, a grandi pezze, l'epidermide. Compii la difficile operazione con la squisita precisione d'un chirurgo. [...] l'anima ubbriaca di felicità. Gli rasi così le guance, poi il mento, poi la fronte fino alla chioma, poi il naso: e recisi anche le palpebre, che restavano stranamente bianche in quell'immensa piaga.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 186.

<sup>99</sup> Bevione, 'L'ossessione rossa', pp. 412, 413.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 412.

As can be seen, Michele reveals here a heightened aesthetic sense that, according to Krafft-Ebing, typifies homosexuals, in whom ‘psychical anomalies’ such as ‘brilliant endowment in art, especially music and poetry’ are largely present.<sup>101</sup> Michele is not only a degenerate with a troubled family history, then, but as a sort of mad artist who darkly and humorously aestheticises the murder, refashioning the body of his victim in the image of his own psychic wounds.

The representation of the moment in which Michele completely loses control of his body seems to interestingly replicate the symptoms of a seizure. In the fourth edition of *L'uomo delinquente*, published in 1889, Lombroso extended the range of biological factors that produced habitual criminals, and identified epilepsy as the key to linking moral insanity and born criminality.<sup>102</sup> Epilepsy affected sexual impulses in particularly striking ways. In 1906, at the Sixth International Conference of Criminal Anthropology in Turin, the same year of the publication of this short story, Lombroso presented a paper on homosexuality in which he asserts that homosexuals, like most criminals, are often epileptics or neurotics.<sup>103</sup> Epileptoid states, Krafft-Ebing confirms, are common among homosexuals: their sexual desire ‘is accompanied by an abnormally powerful feeling of lustful pleasure, which may be so intense as to suggest a feeling of “magnetic” currents passing through the body’.<sup>104</sup> At the turn of the century, then, the possibility that degenerative diseases could produce sexual abnormalities gained ground, while the idea of degeneration lost authority as an explanation of aberrant sexual behaviour.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Krafft-Ebing *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 327-8.

<sup>102</sup> In the 1889 edition of *L'uomo delinquente*, Lombroso includes a long chapter on the concept of epilepsy and the figure of the epileptic criminal, a variation of the born-criminal, with whom several traits are shared. See Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale, ed alle discipline carcerarie*, II, pp. 1-116.

<sup>103</sup> Cesare Lombroso, ‘Du parallélisme entre l’homosexualité et la criminalité innée’, *Archivio di psichiatria*, 27 (1906), 378-81.

<sup>104</sup> Krafft-Ebing *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 326.

<sup>105</sup> See Ashley, “Misfits” in *Fin De Siècle France and Italy*, p.192.

In his 1893 study on sexual deviancy, Julien Chevalier presents a case of a twenty-six-year-old patient, an ordinary man from a good, wealthy family and with a normal sex life, who periodically fell into a sort of pederastic rage of unbelievable violence. When the epileptic attack once seized him, Chevalier notes, the patient chased a young boy with indescribable fury and abused him.<sup>106</sup> In 'L'ossessione rossa', Bevione equally links epilepsy to sexual deviancy. Michele's perturbed mental state is testified by his abnormal sensitivity to sounds: 'non ero più padrone di me; sentivo la mia povera testa naufragare in un mare di folgori, udivo voci misteriose e irresistibili che mi chiamavano, mi consigliavano cose orrende'.<sup>107</sup> During what seems to be a seizure, aberrant sexual behaviour erupts suddenly in the form of an uncontrollable impulse. As Lombroso puts it, 'spesso gli accessi epilettici [sono] accompagnati da propensione al coito'.<sup>108</sup> Coherently, the moment of death of the duke, with Michele cutting his throat, is distinctly represented as an orgasm, which is enhanced by the act of drinking the blood coming out of the victim's neck:

con un colpo vibrato gli tagliai l'arteria carotide. Ne scoppiò fuori un getto caldo, violentissimo [...] Piegai la faccia in quell'amorosa onda e la ricevetti a mezzo il viso, nel centro della fronte, nelle pupille spalancate. Me ne abbeverai, me ne saziai, me ne accecai. Varcai le invalicabili frontiere della delizia terrena e partecipai per un lampo alle felicità eterne.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> See Julien Chevalier, *L'inversion sexuelle : une maladie de la personnalité* (Paris : G. Masson, 1893), pp. 354-6.

<sup>107</sup> Bevione, 'L'ossessione rossa', p. 411.

<sup>108</sup> Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale, ed alle discipline carcerarie*, II, p. 21.

<sup>109</sup> Bevione, 'L'ossessione rossa', pp. 413.

Immediately after having killed the duke, Michele passes out, again closely following Lombroso's hypotheses, according to whom a seizure accompanied by a coitus might eventually provoke a 'perdita della conoscenza'.<sup>110</sup>

Although this short story is imbued with homosexual references, homosexuality as disease is never explicitly mentioned. As Lee Six and Thompson point out, the most disturbing aspect of moral monstrosity 'resides in its very lack of definition or perhaps even definability'.<sup>111</sup> The fact that in this short story abnormal sexuality remains somewhat beyond the reach of clarity dramatically increases its threatening quality: these narratives 'haunt precisely because their characters' monstrosity lacks delineation'.<sup>112</sup> This story might thus be seen as a symptom of the increasing fear towards what was seen as sexual deviancy. When Michele admits 'io invece per la donna non ebbi mai un palpito [...] non amo che il rosso, la fiamma, il sangue, il rosso senza sesso', he is excluding women – but not men – from his consideration, and subtly implies that killing is the substitute for a socially and morally forbidden sex.<sup>113</sup> Duncan argues that Lombroso's work on homosexuality in the early twentieth century was fuelled 'by a perception of a crisis in reproductive sexuality. Atavistic or degenerate traits were the unpredictable symptoms of a heterosexuality gone wrong'.<sup>114</sup> In this story, criminal behaviour functions precisely to police the boundaries between 'normal' and deviant sexuality, with the narrative voice of the author of the prologue that is firmly positioned on the side of the normal. This story seems thus to intercept a cultural climate that was rapidly changing in its growing intolerance and spreading anxieties towards homosexuality. It is not

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<sup>110</sup> Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto alla antropologia, alla medicina legale, ed alle discipline carcerarie*, II, p. 21.

<sup>111</sup> Lee Six and Thompson, 'From Hideous to Hedonist', p. 254.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>113</sup> Bevione, 'L'ossessione rossa', p. 412.

<sup>114</sup> Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality*, p. 19.

coincidental that male homosexual behaviours were consistently and intensely repressed in the 1930s during the Fascist regime, which attributed enormous importance to the concept of male virility.<sup>115</sup>

Needless to say, Michele's obsession with blood is one of the characteristics that most obviously relates him to the literary vampire, a familiar Gothic figure that re-emerged in new shapes in the nineteenth century in famous novels such as Stoker's *Dracula*, in which Lombroso's theories, as we saw, are directly referenced. The nature of the vampire was somewhat betrayed by Italian writers at the turn of the century. As we shall see more closely in the final chapter, the vampire in late nineteenth and early-twentieth century Italian literature owes very little to the classics of British fiction. Blood is almost entirely absent, and the sexual connotations take on very different meanings. Ernest Jones, in his seminal *On the Nightmare* (1931), asserts that 'one of the most important of Freud's discoveries was that morbid dread always signifies repressed sexual wishes', and adds that, in the unconscious mind, 'blood is commonly an equivalent for semen'.<sup>116</sup> Unlike many other Italian texts centred on the vampire, in 'L'ossessione rossa' blood is everywhere, and from the start Michele's vampiric traits are associated with blood and sexuality.

Scholars have noted a juxtaposition between the vampire and the serial killer within both the popular imagination and criminological thinking from the early twentieth century to the contemporary period.<sup>117</sup> It is interesting to highlight that in order to create his

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<sup>115</sup> Homosexuality was 'antithetical to the regime's project of transforming Italians into a race of virile warriors who would lead the military expansion of the new Fascist empire, one of Mussolini's fundamental goals'. Michael R. Ebner, 'The Persecution of Homosexual Men under Fascism', in *Gender, Family and Sexuality. The Private Sphere in Italy, 1860-1945*, ed. by Perry Wilson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 139-56 (p. 140).

<sup>116</sup> Ernest Jones, *On the Nightmare* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931), pp. 106, 119.

<sup>117</sup> For Jörg Waltje, the serial killer 'has become the vampire's modern successor'. Jörg Waltje, *Blood Obsession. Vampires, Serial Murder, and the Popular Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 2. See also Carolin Joan Picart and Cecil Greek, 'The Compulsions of Real/Reel Serial

fictional character, Bevione was arguably influenced by the abovementioned case of Vincenzo Verzeni, a figure that largely informed criminological debates of the period. In late nineteenth-century Italian popular press, he was commonly called ‘the vampire’ or, alternatively, the slaughterer of women, perhaps in the attempt to relate him to Jack the Ripper. The image of the vampire was not, once again, that of the seducer aristocrat, like Lord Ruthven, Carmilla, or Dracula, but rather that of the monstrous, aggressive, sexual serial killer. Verzeni, who was accused of attacking six women and killing two by strangulation between 1869 and 1871, rose to fame as the Italian vampire because of the post-mortem mutilations found on the bodies of his victims. The mutilations consisted, among other things, of cutting off their throats and the disappearance of their blood, a sanguine condition that Verzeni later admitted.<sup>118</sup> There are remarkable affinities between Michele and Verzeni. Firstly, both experience sexual pleasure in the act of killing. Verzeni admitted that he had experienced orgasms while pressing his victim’s throat without killing them, but in the case of the two murder victims sexual satisfaction became so delayed that they died.<sup>119</sup> Secondly, their psyches are altered by genetic defects, and their crimes are principally sexually motivated and a substitute for normal sex.<sup>120</sup>

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Killers and Vampires: Towards a Gothic Criminology’, in *Monsters in and Among Us: Towards a Gothic Criminology*, ed. by Carolin Joan Picart and Cecil Greek (Madison: Fairleigh University Press, 2007), pp. 227-55.

<sup>118</sup> He confessed that ‘le graffiature che si trovarono sulle cosce non erano prodotte colle unghie ma coi denti, perché io, dopo strozzata la morsi e ne succhiai il sangue che era colato, con che godei moltissimo’. See Massimo Centini, *Il vampiro della Padania. Le indagini ed il processo a Vincenzo Verzeni, lo “strangolatore di donne”* (Turin: Ananke, 2009), p. 52.

<sup>119</sup> ‘io ho veramente uccise quelle donne e tentato di strangolare quelle altre, perché provava in quell’atto un immenso piacere, in quanto ché appena metteva loro le mani addosso sul collo [...] ne sentiva un gran gusto. La prima non la stozzai del tutto perché il piacere lo gustai subito appena toccatole il collo’. See Centini, *Il vampiro della Padania*, p. 52.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Verzeni: Vincenzo Verzeni lo sventratore di donne’, in *Processi celebri contemporanei italiani e stranieri*, ed. by Oscar Pio and Nicola Argenti (Naples: Anfossi, 1889), pp. 113-4. Verzeni, as the criminologist Pasquale Penta underlines, ‘ha un’eredità morbosa nei suoi parenti, di cui bisogna tenere conto. Due zii paterni cretinosi, un altro microcefalo, completamente degenerato, imbecille, un cugino criminale’. Pasquale Penta, *I perversimenti sessuali nell’uomo e Vincenzo Verzeni strangolatore di donne. Studio biologico* (Naples: Luigi Pierro Editore, 1893), p. 46. He maintains that ‘in tutti i casi [di perversione sessuale] vi è una eredità morbosa grave se

Ultimately, both are sexual serial murderers, whose principal motive to kill is, as Cusson and Proulx remark, ‘the quest for sexual satisfaction’, which is obtained through the acts of killing and drinking the blood of their victims.<sup>121</sup>

In this period, then, criminological, literary, and popular discourses variously and constantly interacted. As Karen Halttunen asserts, the ‘Gothic narrative of criminal transgression proved central to the modern liberal construction of the concept of criminal deviance’.<sup>122</sup> Lombroso’s science aroused so much interest, attracting and repulsing at the same time, not only because it was built on common prejudices and widespread anxieties that literature in turn largely fuelled, but also because it was imbued with Gothicism. Nicole Rafter and Per Ystehede have argued that Lombroso’s criminology not only ‘incorporated many of the trappings of literary and visual Gothicism’, but also that it was ‘a Gothic science and that Gothicism was essential to its nature’.<sup>123</sup> The born-criminal is a purely Gothic figure, a throwback to an earlier evolutionary era, a degenerate twisted in body and mind. In order to make his readers visualise these Gothic creations, Lombroso filled his books with horrific images and illustrations of delinquents – the fifth edition of *L'uomo delinquente* (1896-7) had become so enlarged with photos that Lombroso had to create a separate volume to include all of them – and established a criminological museum to display his Gothic artefacts, ranging from skeletons of delinquents to coloured wax death masks with inset beady eyes. What is remarkable is that he also invited his readers to participate in the construction of his criminal man. By

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non gravissima’. Penta, *I pervertimenti sessuali*, p. 153. The process of killing, Penta claims, is a substitute for sex: ‘quelle strette feroci gli procuravano l’erizione, l’eiaculazione e tutto lo spasmo voluttuoso dell’atto sessuale’. Penta, *I pervertimenti sessuali*, p. 69.

<sup>121</sup> Maurice Cusson and Jean Proulx, ‘The Motivation and Criminal Career of Sexual Murderers’, in *Sexual Murderers. A Comparative Analysis and New Perspectives*, ed. by Jean Proulx, Éric Beauregard, Maurice Cusson, and Alexandre Nicole (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2007), 143-55 (p. 144).

<sup>122</sup> Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, p. 6.

<sup>123</sup> Rafter and Ystehede, ‘Here Be Dragons’, p. 265.

supplying various materials, including illustrations and verbal portraits, he built a community of followers and interpreters. In the preface to the *Atlante*, the insert of the fifth edition of *L'uomo delinquente*, Lombroso explained its importance for his work, actively interpolating the reader in the interpretive community. The main aim of this work was to give the reader the opportunity to understand and verify, on his own, the truth of his assertions: 'il fine prefissomi nel pubblicare questo atlante è quello di offrire al lettore il mezzo di controllare da sé la verità delle mie asserzioni, senza d'altra parte danneggiare l'economia dello spazio che esige un libro. Quest'atlante è dunque non solo una parte integrante dell'opera, ma anzi la più importante'.<sup>124</sup> Lombroso is once again perfectly aware of the way in which literature can help disseminate, shape, and reinforce new, scientific understandings of criminal behaviour.

The analysis of this short story has shown how fiction can help to popularise contemporary criminological theories. At the same time, though, grey areas remain. The parallel between Michele and Verzeni might be once again illuminating. According to Lombroso, who was called in as an expert witness during the trial to establish the mental disposition of the accused, Verzeni did not possess the physical deformities characteristic of insanity, but the absence of motive, coupled with the brutality of the crime, led him to conclude that the individual had to be somehow abnormal.<sup>125</sup> In his anthropological and biological study of Verzeni, the criminologist Pasquale Penta admits that the criminal 'non portava sul volto lo stampo dell'animale o dell'uomo selvaggio' but he is able to

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<sup>124</sup> Lombroso, 'Prefazione', in Id., *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alla psichiatria. Atlante* (Turin: Bocca, 1897), pp. III-IV (p. III).

<sup>125</sup> Lombroso affirms that Verzeni 'offre alle indagini antropologiche tutti i caratteri dell'uomo sano'. See 'Verzeni: Vincenzo Verzeni lo sventratore di donne', in *Processi celebri contemporanei italiani e stranieri*, p. 89. At the end of the trial, Lombroso admitted that he could not find any abnormalities; to the Corte d'Assise in Bergamo he gave the verdict that in general Verzeni acted normally, except of course during the committing of his crimes, though he had managed to regain the shroud of normalcy afterwards.



single out ‘parecchie e gravi anomalie antropologiche’ that would have been otherwise impossible to note for non-experts.<sup>126</sup> Likewise, there is nothing unusual in the physical aspect and the everyday behaviour of Michele, at least as long as he is able to repress his destructive impulses. He is not, then, an evolutionary throwback whose propensity for committing crime is discernible through an obvious physical malformation.

Monstrosity, as these examples show, no longer constitutes an aberration of nature that is entirely and easily discernible, but is rather something alien harboured within apparently civilised, normal, and respectable individuals. These stories, whether real or fictional, bring to light the tentacular power but also the ambiguities of positivist criminologists’ claims, who were never able to find reassuring, unequivocal answers to the question of delinquency, and were forced to constantly revise their theories. The original aim of Bevione to try to understand the criminal’s mind is thus ultimately frustrated. The conclusion of the story, in which the jury rules out insanity and condemns Michele to death, confirms the impossibility of capturing and understanding the roots of evil. This is precisely why these narratives still hold their disturbing power. It is unsurprising, I believe, that Verzeni’s case, shrouded in mystery and imbued with Gothicism, continues to haunt contemporary literary and criminological discourses.<sup>127</sup> The origins of criminal deviancy remain fundamentally inexplicable.

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<sup>126</sup> Penta, *I pervertimenti sessuali*, pp. 43, 50. Amongst these anomalies, Penta mentions the following: ‘la volta del frontale e la maggior parte del parietale destro sono abbassate [...] il seno frontale destro invece e la porzione interna dell’arcata orbitaria omonima, sono molto sviluppati’. Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>127</sup> Most contemporary Italian books, whether academic or divulgative, focusing on serial killers deal extensively with Verzeni’s case. See Ugo Fornari and Jutta Birkhoff, *Serial Killer: tre mostri infelici del passato a confronto* (Turin: Centro scientifico, 1996), pp. 5-26; Carlo Lucarelli and Massimo Picozzi, *Serial killer: storie di ossessione omicida* (Milan: Mondolibri, 2003), pp. 9-23; Peter Vronsky, *Serial Killer: The Method and Madness of Monsters* (New York: Berkley Groups, 2004), pp. 58-61; Giordano Lupi, *Serial killer italiani: cento casi agghiaccianti da Vincenzo Verzeni a Donato Bilancia* (Florence: Olimpia, 2005), pp. 45-50.

## Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, late nineteenth-century theorisations on the criminal's mind largely influenced the literary sphere, and embryonic forms of psychological thrillers proliferated. Literature responded variously and certainly not homogeneously to the many speculations around the very nature of delinquency. Works such as De Marchi's *Il cappello del prete* and Capuana's *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* seem to draw a connection between wrongdoing and free will, but the insistence on the concept of madness ultimately undermines such association, revealing beneath the surface anxieties concerning inborn mental issues. Bevione's 'L'ossessione rossa', on the contrary, portrays a sexual murderer that bears numerous similarities to the deviants depicted by criminologists, deeply aggravating fears surrounding homosexuality and aberrant sexual behaviour. Yet, the author avoids the utilisation of stereotypical physical traits in his representation of the protagonist, exposing the ambiguities of positivist criminology and its inability to provide a single, universal law of delinquency. The project of developing a semiotics of the criminal body that would reveal the secret motives and intentions of the criminal mind is thus ultimately frustrated. Moreover, this chapter has suggested that the interaction between criminology, crime fiction, and Gothic imaginary was far from being unidirectional. The cultural and literary exchanges between these different fields were in fact pervasive. The issues that criminologists were discussing and exploring at the time filtered into the novel, while, by the end of the century, the Gothic had become a functional component of criminological writing.

The last two chapters have thus revealed how the Gothic permeates those stories of crime in which the ordering and rational aspects of the world are overshadowed by terrifying spectacles involving urban decay, filth, disease, mental illness, and death. The

difficulty of catching criminals within the tangled and apparently inescapable urban space is coupled with the frustration of not being able to understand them. The portrayal of the city space as potentially dangerous fanned the irrational fears and anxieties of a population that lusted for sensations, as every stranger might be one of these monsters, and every dark corner could turn out to be a potential crime scene. Terrors and horrors abruptly irrupt in the new, mysterious world, where anyone could be an enemy, because there seems to be none capable of navigating it. More than ever before, there is the need for new forms of control, both within crime narratives and outside of them, and for some expert to identify the danger and bring order. The next chapter will thus examine the complex emergence of the literary detective in connection with the struggle for authority that characterises post-unification Italy.

## Chapter 4. AUTHORITY AND DETECTION

As we saw, Italian scholarship has long singled out the centrality of the investigation in the identification and categorisation of the *giallo*, with the problematic effect of creating an increasingly homogenous and rigidly defined literary canon. Nonetheless, scholars have seldom focused on crucial elements such as the paradigm of detection and the figure of the literary sleuth, which, on the contrary, have been at the centre of many American and British studies.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the shortage of proper investigators populating late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian literature has further discouraged critics from addressing and analysing the complex, inconsistent, and problematic emergence of such figure. Except for some sporadic contributions, then, they have merely touched upon some possible precursors of more modern detectives, rarely providing a close analysis of the texts or the characters.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Heather Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early-Nineteenth Century Popular Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Haia Shpayer-Makov, 'Explaining the Rise and Success of Detective Memoirs in Britain', in *Police Detectives in History, 1750-1950*, ed. by Clive Emsley and Haia Shpayer-Makov (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 103-33; *The Ascent of the Detective. Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Charles Brownson, *The Figure of the Detective: A Literary History and Analysis* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Massimo Siviero, for instance, has named Dr Weiss, one of the characters featuring in Francesco Mastriani's *Il mio cadavere* (1852), while other commentators have drawn attention to the lawyer Don Ciccio Scuoto, depicted by Emilio De Marchi in his *Il cappello del prete*, although neither do any kind of significant detection. See Massimo Siviero, *Come scrivere un giallo napoletano* (Naples: Graus Editore, 2003); Portinari, 'De Marchi', *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Turin: Utet, 1992), pp. 146-151. Rambelli, 'Il presunto giallo italiano: dalla preistoria alla storia', p. 232. Crovi, *Tutti i colori del giallo*, p. 33. Pezzotti, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction*, p. 57. More interest has been shown, with reason, in Inspector Domenico Arganti, popularly called Lucertolo, the protagonist of Giulio Piccini's four novels published between 1883 and 1884. See Rambelli, 'Il presunto giallo italiano: dalla preistoria alla storia', p. 235; Claudio Gallo, 'Il commissario Lucertolo: uno Sherlock Holmes in riva all'Arno', in Giulio Piccini, *I ladri di cadaveri* [1884] (Reggio Emilia: Aliberti, 2004), pp. 291-310; Maurizio Pistelli, 'Jarro proto-giallista: la saga del commissario Lucertolo', in *Giulio Piccini (Jarro) tra Risorgimento e Grande Guerra*, pp. 107-36; Francesca Facchi, 'Le

This chapter seeks to fill the gap, charting the trajectory of the investigative paradigm within a variety of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century literary and non-literary discourses on criminality, and examining the development of the literary detective alongside the search for authority that characterises the post-unification period, with the establishment of the modern police force and the rise of forensic criminology. From a methodological point of view, this chapter takes issue with the Foucauldian perspective that the detective story participated in a sort of gentrification of wrongdoing, with this new kind of hero that was invented to assuage fears and anxieties common to a predominantly middle-class readership.<sup>3</sup> Critics have attributed the emergence of the detective to a specific desire for social and epistemological order in the face of the changes attendant with burgeoning capitalist society, stressing the conservatism of such narratives and the reassuring effects of textual resolution.<sup>4</sup> The nineteenth-century detective has been increasingly compared to the institutionally sanctioned doctor as described by Foucault, that is an authority figure who reads the human body, identifies

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molteplici facce della polizia: Lucertolo, primo investigatore seriale della letteratura italiana', *Altre modernità* 15 (2016), 6-23.

<sup>3</sup> In his seminal *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), the French historian argues that the emergence of the detective story must be read in tandem with changing governmental power structures, and that it represents an effect of the transition from a legal system based on control through violence – the sovereign power – to one based on control through information – the disciplinary power. Whereas during the days of public executions, the criminal was glorified and symbolically empowered, the rise of literature of crime and detection participated in the gentrification of wrongdoing. Foucault shows how literature is enmeshed in social and ideological structures and plays an active role in the network of social control, reinforced by journalism, police, and scientific disciplines. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Following a Foucauldian perspective, various studies in the 1980s have become seminal texts in their consideration of the genre. Stephen Knight famously argues that 'the major examples of crime fiction not only create an idea (or a hope, or a dream) about controlling crime, but both realize and validate a whole view of the world, one shared by the people who become the central audience to buy, read and find comfort in a particular variety of crime fiction'. According to Dennis Porter, the detective story 'take[s] a stand in defense of the established social order' and 'promotes the "heroization" of the agent of surveillance in his struggle against threats from within'. Detective fiction is essentially 'a literature of reassurance and conformism'. Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 2; Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 125, 220.

and categorises ‘diseases’ (or, in the detective’s case, clues), and finally declares what will become accepted as ‘natural truth’ about the individual.<sup>5</sup> Dennis Porter, for instance, defines it as ‘the unseen seer, who stands at the center of the Panopticon and employs his “science” to make all things visible on behalf of the forces of order’.<sup>6</sup>

I refute here such an ideologically unproblematic view, and its implicit denial of the detective story’s capacities for resistance and opposition.<sup>7</sup> Instead, by examining stories of crime and detection alongside a range of texts such as works of positivist criminology, police training manuals, and autobiographies of detectives, I aim to underscore this literature as an ideologically complicated and even confrontational body of work, marked by formal diversity and thematic ambiguity.

After revealing the strong distrust that public opinion showed towards the violent and corrupt police force of the authoritarian government of the newly unified country, which might have initially discouraged some Italian writers from choosing to depict the life and the adventures of a policeman, I will analyse the inherent ambiguity of Italian literary investigators, who operate mostly outside and above the law they are supposed to defend and whose interest in solving crime is motivated more by ambition rather than morals. I will also explore how crime fiction portrays, evaluates, and critiques the scientific investigative paradigm, which is ultimately represented as unable to provide closure and thus rejected in favour of a more providential view of justice. I will finally

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* [1963] trans. by Alan Sheridan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> In the British context, scholars working on crime fiction have increasingly challenged the Marxist notion of the detective genre as a carrier for ideology, and the ensuing Foucauldian repudiation of detective fiction’s capacities for resistance and opposition, arguing for a more flexible reading of the form as an ideologically varied body of work. See Simon Joyce, *Capital Offenses: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Mukherjee, *Crime and Empire*; Clare Clarke, *Late Victorian Crime Fiction in the Shadows of Sherlock* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

move to the realm of female detection, which has been barely acknowledged by Italianists.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the female investigator represents an extremely fascinating, defiant figure that challenges accepted notions of womanhood. The texts I will look at raise powerful questions about the way in which femininity and essential identity, and consequently normality and deviancy, were perceived at the time. Ultimately, this chapter calls into question the apparently conservative and comforting character of the detective story, bringing to light an array of obscure and forgotten texts that help not only to broaden the canon of early Italian crime fiction but also to re-think the form as challenging and problematic.

#### 4.1 Police Under Attack: Violence, Repression, and Corruption

Throughout the nineteenth century, the relationship between Italians and the police was particularly fraught.<sup>9</sup> Before the unification, public opinion increasingly regarded it as a

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<sup>8</sup> See, among the few exceptions, Giuliana Pieri and Lucia Rinaldi, 'Italian Women Crime Writers', *Italian Crime Fiction*, 115-131; Pistelli, *Un secolo in giallo*, pp. 55-61.

<sup>9</sup> The history of the Italian police has been a trouble one from the very beginning. The oldest national police force was the *Carabinieri*, founded in 1814 along the lines of the French *gendarmerie* as a royal guard for the Piedmontese King. It gradually developed as a force to patrol rural highways for bandits and brigands in coordination with the Ministry of the Interior. The Public Security police was formed in 1852 in Piedmont and commanded by administrators in the Ministry of Interior and was established to patrol the growing cities in the nineteenth century. The apparatus of police endowed with a civil status coexisted on national territory with the army corps of the Royal *Carabinieri*. In unified Italy the two forces, despite having similar roles, undertook different tasks and were often positioned as antagonistic. By the late nineteenth century, the *Carabinieri* had also taken up duties in the cities, creating confusion as to the division of labour between them and the police. In addition to the overlapping jurisdictions, police suffered from understaffing. The problem of recruitment stemmed from the low pay accorded both administrators and the uniformed ranks of the police. See Massimo Bonino, *La polizia italiana nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento: aspetti culturali e operativi* (Rome: Laurus Robuffo, 2005), pp. 17-87; Jonathan Dunnage, 'Sotto la pelle: per un'analisi sociologica e psicologica della vita del poliziotto', in *La polizia in Italia e in Europa: punto sugli studi e prospettive di ricerca*, ed. by Livio Antonielli (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2006), pp. 179-89; Simona Mori, 'Becoming Policemen in Nineteenth-Century Italy: Police Gender Culture Through the Lens of Professional Manuals', in *A History of Police and Masculinities 1700-2010*, ed. by David G. Barrie and Susan Broomhall (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 102-22 (p. 107).

persecutory and almost invariably corrupt instrument of a despotic monarchy.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, soon after the first annexations in 1859, the Savoyard administration began to reorganise and rebuild the Italian police force in the attempt to improve its effectiveness. Nonetheless, this would not be enough to give the whole police body a new reputation.<sup>11</sup> Although in the period shortly after unification citizens felt relieved from the intolerable oppression of the Austrian police and gratefully welcomed the new model of public security introduced by the Savoyard constitutional monarchy, expecting the police to become the guardians of law and order in the service of the nation, by the 1870s this public trust in the police's commitment to the law had vanished. As scholars have shown, the police of the new state stemmed largely from old pre-unification organisations, and there was a strong influence of absolutist forms of crime prevention on the post-unification policing strategies.<sup>12</sup>

The frequent recourse to military rule and harsh measures of prevention to eliminate brigandage in the 1860s gave the Italian administration and police system an anti-popular character from the very first years of the unification.<sup>13</sup> In the 1870s, fuelled by the many police corruption scandals, criticism of the inadequacies of the police intensified, and the whole system came under increasing attack, particularly from the press. For example, in Milan, the radical newspaper *Il Secolo* provided a remarkable daily chronicle of local

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<sup>10</sup> Enrico Francia, 'Polizia e opinione pubblica in Toscana nel Quarantotto', in *Quando crolla lo Stato. Studi sull'Italia preunitaria*, ed. by Paolo Macry (Naples: Liguori, 2003), pp. 141-77.

<sup>11</sup> Marius [van C.J. van Bommel Suyck], *La pubblica sicurezza in Italia* (Milan: Aliprandi, 1896), pp. 39, 43.

<sup>12</sup> See Mori, 'Becoming Policemen in Nineteenth-Century Italy', p. 106; Jonathan Dunnage, *The Italian Police and the Rise of Fascism: A Case Study of the Province of Bologna 1897-1925* (London: Praeger, 1997), p. 1. As Emilio Saracini noted at the beginning of the twentieth century, towards the end the previous century 'al nome di Polizia si legavano ancora vecchie diffidenze e memorie di angherie e soprusi, retaggio di quando l'ufficio di polizia si confondeva con quello del magistrato giudicante e dello strapotere delle polizie segrete, favorito dall'Inquisizione spietata e dal più irragionevole fanatismo religioso, che era tale da spiare persino il pensiero dei cittadini'. Emilio Saracini, *Crepuscoli della polizia* (Naples: SIEM, 1922), pp. 26-7.

<sup>13</sup> See Dunnage, *The Italian Police*, p. 5.



police actions, which criticised the head office for its zeal in monitoring and persecuting political dissidents, and its complete neglect of disorder in the streets.<sup>14</sup> In the 1890s, in the face of mounting social unrest and political opposition, the governments exploited real and imaginary threats to public order as a pretext for an unprecedented experiment in arbitrary government, as it is testified by the declaration of martial law in 1894 and 1898 in numerous parts of Italy.<sup>15</sup>

The hard and illiberal measures that the authoritarian state used in order to fight crime were echoed in the professional manuals for police officers published in this period. In *Della polizia considerata come mezzo di preventiva difesa. Trattato teorico-pratico* (1853), the most comprehensive and influential work on public safety of the pre-unification era, the delegate of police in Pisa, Bartolommeo Fiani, remarks that the police are justified to ‘usare la forza [...] ove venga opposta resistenza’, thereby accepting, if not supporting, the application of violent practices in everyday situations.<sup>16</sup> According to John Davis, the often brutal and arbitrary methods that were utilised might be read as a sort of compensation for the absence of more systematic and bureaucratic forms of policing: until the end of the century, he asserts, ‘the police forces in Italy remained inadequate and ill-equipped to carry out the multiplicity of tasks and duties that were assigned to them’.<sup>17</sup>

The scarcity of autobiographies of Italian police officers between the 1840s and 1880s is a symptom as well as an effect of the distrust of the public towards policemen and detectives, which in turn made Italian writers at least reluctant to speak about them. In the same period in Great Britain, as Haia Shpayer-Makov has shown, with the creation

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<sup>14</sup> See Mori, ‘The police and the Urban “Dangerous Classes”’, p. 282.

<sup>15</sup> See Davis, *Conflict and Control*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> Bartolommeo Fiani, *Della polizia considerata come mezzo di preventiva difesa. Trattato teorico-pratico* (Florence: Tipografia Nazionale Italiana, 1853), p. 438.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *Conflict and Control*, p. 241.

of a detective unit at Scotland Yard in 1842 and with the consolidation of the investigator as a distinctive occupation within the British public service, detectives began to appear more regularly in British literature, and memoirs and recollections of policemen started proliferating.<sup>18</sup> With the passage of time, both the periodical press and the people increasingly recognised the police as integral to the urban management of law and order and as an incontrovertible agent of justice. In addition, writers' flattering descriptions of policemen, as in the novels of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, played a major role in elevating detective figures.<sup>19</sup> In Italy, on the contrary, as Marco Soresina has thoroughly demonstrated, autobiographies of policemen remained very sporadic throughout the long nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> The Italian policeman could simply not be seen as suitable for taking on the role of the popular hero.

This cultural climate is mirrored in the often unpleasant and unsympathetic descriptions of police officers by nineteenth-century Italian writers. Paolo Valera in *Milano sconosciuta* maintains to have never seen 'mercenario più sleale e ributtante, cagnotto più feroce, sbirro più sfrontato, sgherro più insolente, aguzzino più implacabile dell'agente di P.S.'. <sup>21</sup> Francesco Mastriani's *Il processo Cordier* (1878), which relates the trial for the brutal murder of an Englishman, displays a strong critique of the police force, its methods of investigation and, in particular, the abuse of authority that its members continually exercise. The narrator defines the police officer as a 'figura temutissima' and explains that the problem of brigandage has dramatically increased 'il potere discrezionale della polizia che [...] esagerava il numero e lo ardimento delle

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<sup>18</sup> Shpayer-Makov, 'Explaining the Rise and Success of Detective Memoirs in Britain', p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective*, pp. 192-93, 194-202.

<sup>20</sup> Marco Soresina, 'Le memorie dei funzionari di polizia italiani nell'età liberale in una prospettiva comparata', *Studi Storici*, 4 (2017), pp. 1097-1131 (p. 1099).

<sup>21</sup> Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, p. 230.

congiure'.<sup>22</sup> In the late *Il brindisi di sangue* (1893), Mastriani condemns the 'nefandezze' perpetrated by the police to two unfortunate women, who are brutally searched: with a 'ghigno laido e feroce' the police delegate 'assisteva a quella scellerata esecuzione. Non era sazia la libidine poliziesca'.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the whole police system is continuously under attack in Giulio Piccini's novels with Lucertolo (aka Inspector Domenico Arganti) as protagonist. Policemen are either depicted as inadequate, brutal, and greedy but essentially inoffensive, or as clever individuals who sooner or later fall into the hands of evil.<sup>24</sup> In *L'assassinio nel vicolo della luna* the murderer is a former fireman who has managed to join the police to move suspicion away from himself, while in *I ladri di cadaveri* (1884) a brilliant member of the police turns out to be the instigator of two heinous killings.

Moreover, in these texts, the figures who operate as detectives are almost invariably enigmatic characters with a long and enduring relation to the criminal underworld. Mastriani's *Il processo Cordier* introduces Varricchiella, a plebeian with a tenebrous past and a horribly deformed physical aspect – he is presented as 'rozzo, ignorante, cinico' as well as a 'sgorbio animale' and a 'brutta e sinistra figura' – who conceals an uncanny talent as sleuth: 'ci sono uomini, che sono fatti per esercitare l'ufficio di segugi. L'arte poliziesca è la loro protuberanza. Varricchiella era veramente un genio in quest'arte'.<sup>25</sup> Lucertolo is equally originally portrayed by Piccini as a young, cunning, and extremely ambiguous police officer who is nonetheless inextricably tied up with the criminal

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<sup>22</sup> Mastriani, *Il processo Cordier*, I, pp. 10, 10-1.

<sup>23</sup> Francesco Mastriani, *Il brindisi di sangue* (Naples: G. Salvati, 1893), p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> In *I ladri di cadaveri* the magistrate orders that 'ad ogni rumore un secondino entri nella prigione [...] e sieno inflitte al carcerato le solite pene corporali'. Piccini, *I ladri di cadaveri*, p. 177. In *La figlia dell'aria* the police commissioner complains 'oggi la polizia si fa a caso', and its members are exclusively driven by the money, 'invasati da quel desiderio di vantaggiarsi, che oggi forse più che mai predomina su tutto e in tutti'. Giulio Piccini, *La figlia dell'aria* (Milan: Treves, 1884), pp. 42, 53.

<sup>25</sup> Mastriani, *Il processo Cordier*, I, pp. 21, 13.

underworld. It is apparent, in the conception of both characters, the influence of Eugène-François Vidocq. This famous French criminal, initially condemned to the galleys, was then brought into the Napoleonic policing system, rose to be head of the Sûreté, and after retiring in 1827 produced his widely popular *Mémoires* (1828-29) with the aid of ghost-writers. Although this work was never translated into Italian, it was not difficult for Mastriani and Piccini to get hold of a copy either in French or in the English translation.<sup>26</sup>

Precisely like Vidocq, Varricchiella's and Lucertolo's best weapons are disguise and knowledge: they solve the mysteries because they live in those dangerous areas where crimes are committed, they can recognise the delinquents and identify their practices, as they are initiated with the workings of criminal activity and not rationally operating outsiders. Particularly in Piccini's *L'assassinio nel vicolo della luna* and his sequel *Il processo Bartelloni* (1883), much emphasis is placed on showing the ambiguity of Lucertolo and his contradictory character, repeatedly described as a capable detective but also as a man 'senza alcuna moralità, prepotente, rabbioso, violento'.<sup>27</sup> Towards the end of *L'assassinio nel vicolo della luna*, for instance, he is depicted while stealing a sizable amount of money from an old, dying woman who asked him to give it to her son. This long sequence reveals him as a 'uomo senza scrupoli' who 'vive fra dissolutezze e soprusi' and exploits his profession as a means to 'avere il denaro, che diventa sempre più necessario alla vita che mena di sordide crapule'.<sup>28</sup> This episode, which is essentially useless in the economy of the detective narrative, is not simply included, as Francesca

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<sup>26</sup> Most Italian scholars, including Soresina in his 'Le memorie dei funzionari di polizia italiani nell'età liberale in una prospettiva comparata' (p. 1100), maintain that Vidocq's memoirs were translated into Italian in 1845 by Angelo Orvieto in three volumes as *I veri misteri Parigini* and repeatedly re-printed in the 1840s. In reality, this book is the translation of the apocryphal *Les Vrais Mystères de Paris*, a *feuilleton* in the tradition of the city mysteries attributed to Vidocq and published in France in 1844.

<sup>27</sup> Piccini, *L'assassinio nel vicolo della luna*, p. 256.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Facchi argues, to reiterate the connection between Lucertolo and Vidocq, but it is primarily a way to critique the vicious and corrupt nature of the Italian police.<sup>29</sup>

As can be noted, in these texts the authority of the new-born state, metaphorically embodied by the police, is eventually deeply undermined. Corruption is spreading like an epidemic disease and the detectives are far from being represented as reassuring, reliable figures whose moral code and conceptions of duty and justice the readers can trust. Instead, they are often greedy, morally equivocal anti-heroes with an uncertain status in the social order, who stand halfway between respectable society and the criminal world they investigate. Critics have repeatedly stressed that the detective story, particularly when it is imbued with positivism, portrays the law as natural, performing a cultural work that helps to reproduce values and subject positions maintaining the societal status quo. On the contrary, early Italian crime fiction, even when it pivots on a detective figure, does not reflect the views of dominant ideology, but it rather problematises the nature of human justice and denounces the repressive authority of the state, which is seen as incapable of fulfilling the needs of the people.

#### 4.2 Professionalism and Scientific Detection

The paradigm of detection had scarce, if any, relevance in police writing until the end of the nineteenth century. There is an evident lack of references to the investigative work of the police in both pre and post-unification treatises such as Fiani's *Della polizia considerata come mezzo di preventiva difesa. Trattato teorico-pratico* or the widely read *La polizia e le classi pericolose della società* (1871), written by the provincial police chief of Bologna Giovanni Bolis. In addition, except for pioneering works such as Luigi

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<sup>29</sup> Facchi, 'Le molteplici facce della polizia', p. 11.

Bolza's *Misteri della polizia austriaca in Italia, narrati dal conte L. B.* (1863), autobiographies of policemen were absent until the late 1870s, perhaps also due to the lack of Italian editions of the fundamental Vidocq's *Mémoires*, whose rapid translation into English played a major role in promoting the figure of the police detective and paved the way for its autonomisation and professionalisation.

The rise of positivism in Italy, with its emphasis on empiricism and rationality, contributed to the development of a new approach to reality and a new strategy of deciphering its objects by looking at the most trivial and seemingly uninteresting details. Carlo Ginzburg has theoretically defined this as the 'evidential or conjectural paradigm', a new epistemological model specifically based on semiotics that emerged in the social sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century and rapidly influenced various fields such as art history, literature, medicine, criminology, and, we should add, police writing.<sup>30</sup> Around the late 1870s, art historian Giovanni Morelli conducted studies of art historical subjects by examining ear lobes, fingernails, hands, and feet in order to identify the real artists behind incorrectly attributed paintings, while Lombroso and other positivist criminologists focused their attention to the same details in the attempt to identify the constitutive features of the born-criminal. It is precisely in these years that memoirs and recollections of Italian police officers started proliferating, with several agents who ventured into autobiographical narration after leaving the service, including famous commissioners of the pre-unification period who were eager to justify themselves to the public.<sup>31</sup> Although there was an inevitable contamination between reality and literary

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<sup>30</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm' [1979], in Carlo Ginzburg, *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, trans. by John and Anne C. Tedeschi (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), pp. 96-125.

<sup>31</sup> Examples of memoirs in the fields of crime include Paolo Locatelli's *Miseria e beneficenza. Ricordi di un funzionario di pubblica sicurezza* (1878), Federico Giorio's *Ricordi di questura* (Milan: Tipografia artistica, 1882), Cesare Brambilla's *Memorie d'un agente segreto della polizia*

models, with several concessions to the melodramatic and the *feuilleton*, these texts generally offered a realistic picture of the life of the policeman in unified Italy, and the concept of professional, investigative work was increasingly emphasised.<sup>32</sup> Insight, intelligence, intuition, and acumen became in this model the real weapons of the police officer drawn in memoirs, as well as his capacity for disguise, for keeping potential criminals under surveillance, observing the scene of crime and drawing correct conclusions.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, as Simona Mori notes, in the 1870s and 1880s professional manuals ‘turned their attention to the issue of expertise and competence’, due to the influence of the social sciences as well as foreign organisations such as the British Metropolitan Police, which is compared and contrasted to the Italian Police by the officer Alessandro Cuniberti in his *La polizia di Londra: con note ed osservazioni sulla polizia italiana* (1872).<sup>34</sup> A key text, in this respect, is *Della polizia* (1880), written by the prefect of Cremona Pietro Celli. For him, police personnel would need to gear up to competently perform not only the activities of prevention and repression, but also those of observation and investigation. For the first time, detection appears a central constituent for that branch that he calls ‘polizia scopritrice’, to which he devotes a long chapter.<sup>35</sup> This is the

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*di stato* (1884), and Domenico Cappa’s *Trentadue anni di servizio nella polizia italiana. Memorie del maggiore cav. Domenico Cappa, ex-comandante delle Guardie di PS di Milano* (1892-93).

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Cappa’s memoirs, where the former policeman reminds his readers that, in the 1860s, he used to be called ‘Javert’, referring to the famous Inspector that makes his appearance in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862): ‘io che ho vissuto e son vivo, mi sono ispirato a questo tipo immaginario e leggendario; ed ogni qualvolta, per qualche mia azione, mi sono sentito qualificare - Torino informi - col nome di Javert [al principio degli anni Sessanta], ho sorriso di compiacenza non solo, ma forse anche d’orgoglio; poiché il genio crea qualche volta i prototipi e l’uomo qualche volta può incarnarli ed esplicarli con azioni veri, sotto al raggio del sole o nelle tenebre misteriose della notte’. Domenico Cappa, *Trentadue anni di servizio nella polizia italiana. Memorie del maggiore cav. Domenico Cappa, ex-comandante delle Guardie di PS di Milano*, 2 vols (Milan: Fratelli Dumolard, 1892-3), I, pp. 12, 180.

<sup>33</sup> Mori, ‘Becoming Policemen in Nineteenth-Century Italy’, p. 112; Soresina, ‘Le memorie dei funzionari di polizia italiani nell’età liberale in una prospettiva comparata’, p. 1117.

<sup>34</sup> Mori, ‘Becoming Policemen in Nineteenth-Century Italy’, p. 113.

<sup>35</sup> Pietro Celli, *Della polizia* (Milan: Tipografia Luigi Di Giacomo Pirola, 1880), pp. 159-210.

cultural climate in which, as Ginzburg points out, some of the most famous fictional detectives of all time, including Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, originally appeared. They discover the perpetrator of a crime 'on the basis of evidence that is imperceptible to most people', through a method of interpretation 'based on discarded information, on marginal data, considered in some way significant'.<sup>36</sup> Precisely like Holmes, the Italian policeman, according to Celli, 'accorre immediatamente sul luogo [...] scorre rapidamente il teatro del delitto, ne scruta il terreno in ogni punto con mirabile accortezza: visita minutamente ogni oggetto e ne considera le più lievi particolarità, per es., d'un cencio, d'un bottone, d'una carta, di un'orma'.<sup>37</sup> Finally, 'mette in connessione logica le cose osservate, e ne trae le conclusioni'.<sup>38</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the fields of medicine, criminology, and state policing began to increasingly intertwine and interact. In 1879, Alphonse Bertillon established in Paris the 'Bertillonage', a standardised system for taking key measurements of prisoners, whose aim was to enable the identification of repeat offenders, while Francis Galton was working in the same period in Great Britain in the areas of composite photography – a technology that aimed to eliminate physiological features only present in a small number of subjects, while emphasising those features common to the majority of criminals – and fingerprint identification. Significantly, in Italy, those who were responsible for the organisation of the police were increasingly fascinated by the positivistic approach to crime and deviancy. The police delegate Giuseppe Alongi draws on Lombroso's studies in his work *Polizia e delinquenza in Italia* (1887), calling for the specialisation and scientification of the police, and claiming that

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<sup>36</sup> Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm', pp. 98, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Celli, *Della polizia*, p. 171.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.



its tools in the ongoing war against crime and delinquency are now primarily intellectual.<sup>39</sup>

It is thus unsurprising that in the 1870s and 1880s, Italian crime stories began to embrace embryonically the scientific dimension of detection. In Mastriani's *Il processo Cordier* Varricchiella sends one of his informers to a house in which he believes that a murder has been committed because 'ivi egli avrebbe avuto a raccogliere larghe messi d'indizii, di prove di ogni sorta'.<sup>40</sup> When the man finds what appears to be a bloodstain on the floor, he utilises a chemical in order to make the smear come out:

cavò dalla saccoccia una bocchetta ben turata; poscia si tolse l'abito, dal quale avea pur cavato un moccichino bianco: pose il lume a terra in prossimità del letto; e, sturata la bocchetta, sparse una parte del contenuto di questa su una macchia nerastra ch'era sotto il letto. Vi passò poscia un becco del suo bianco fazzoletto. Sul bianco lino apparve una macchietta arancia che a poco a poco si fe' rossa.<sup>41</sup>

Such an attention to the techniques and the scientific methods for solving crimes is more noticeable in Piccini's *I ladri di cadaveri*, which predates Holmes' appearance and should be regarded as one of the first and most interesting examples of early Italian detective fiction.<sup>42</sup> In this story, Lucertolo, who has by now become 'l'uomo più destro, che avesse

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<sup>39</sup> Alongi, *Polizia e delinquenza in Italia*, pp. 39n-40.

<sup>40</sup> Mastriani, *Il processo Cordier*, I, p. 86.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 99.

<sup>42</sup> Piccini is aware that he is one of the few writers who is trying to disseminate and popularise the emerging detective fiction genre in the Italian context. In the preface of the novel *L'istrione* (1887), the author states, 'Io fui il solo, alcuni han detto, l'unico, a cercare di dare tra noi il *Romanzo Giudiziario*, con impronta tutta italiana: senza andar nulla a pescare negli stranieri. [...] Studiai, per anni, gli ordinamenti della polizia toscana, modello a tutte le altre, e sulla quale si foggio [...] la stessa polizia inglese; mi appassionai nel soggetto, per alcuni mesi seguii in persona

di quel tempo in Firenze la polizia giudiziaria', investigates a macabre double murder, after two limbs belonging to a woman and a man – 'una mano tagliata, tutta sanguinosa' and 'un uomo, senza testa, e tutto intriso nel proprio sangue' – are suddenly discovered in the periphery of Florence.<sup>43</sup> This novel features a confident, purely scientific detective, frequently depicted on his hands and knees, with a magnifying glass in hand, looking for traces of evidence, footprints, fingerprints, and other marks which seem entirely invisible to the uncomprehending other police officers: 'non solo aveva guardato le macchie del sangue, ma la forma, la disposizione di esse, poi si era dato a studiare lo stato in cui era la strada; accostatosi al greto, si era chinato, messo carponi, cercando quasi ogni fil d'erba'.<sup>44</sup> According to him, 'i più piccoli indizii hanno la massima importanza per la scoperta della verità'.<sup>45</sup> After having 'osservato' and 'fiutato', he is able to mentally reconstruct the scene of crime by virtue of observing blood smears and measuring the distance between the footprints:

il delitto è stato commesso da un uomo solo, da un uomo forte e robusto.

Guardino che orme fonde han lasciato i suoi piedi [...] la sua vittima?

Non troviamo tracce di essa. Perché? [...] Perché la vittima deve essere

stata sorpresa dall'assassino sopra un veicolo, e non ha potuto metter

piede in terra. Guardino qui! [le orme] [...] Qui il veicolo è stato

fermato, qui c'è stata lotta tra l'assassino e la sua vittima. [...] Facciano

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certe operazioni della polizia criminale, assistei agl'interrogatorii di delinquenti, appena arrestati, mi fu permesso di rivolger loro domande che mi parevano abilissime: durante un certo tempo mi sono creduto un Vidocq, un uomo de' più destri in tal materia: mi sembrava che, al posto di tutti i questori del Regno, in certi frangenti io avrei operato meglio, con più intelligenza. Mi direte che non sarebbe stato difficile'. Giulio Piccini, 'Prefazione', in Id., *L'istrione* (Milan: Treves, 1887), pp. X-XI.

<sup>43</sup> Piccini, *I ladri di cadaveri*, pp. 30, 28, 27.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

attenzione alle orme, sempre eguali dello stesso piede grosso, e molto rozzamente calzato [...] Qui l'assassino si è riposato un istante.<sup>46</sup>

The similarities between Holmes and Lucertolo are impressive. As Holmes does in *The House of the Baskervilles* (1901-2), where he inspects a walking stick left behind by a client and is able to 'reconstruct the man by an examination of it', Lucertolo identifies here one of the victims by carefully scrutinising the mutilated female hand: 'osservino innanzi a tutto il rovescio del dito pollice. Vedono questi piccoli segni neri? Ci rivelano che la donna era una cucitrice, o lavorava molto di ago per le sue necessità. Le tracce dell'ago sono chiare'.<sup>47</sup> He is also able to build the profile of the culprit through the examination of the involuntary traces that are left behind at the crime scene: 'quanto alla persona di lui sappiamo già dover essere grave, pesante, dalle orme che ha lasciato sul teatro del delitto, corpulenta per le aperture che ha fatto, passando a traverso il canneto [...] di statura piuttosto vantaggiata, come si rileva dall'altezza delle macchie, lasciate sulle canne'.<sup>48</sup> Such a description matches the many we find in the Holmes' canon, in which the great detective is often described while reconstructing actions at a crime scene and singling out murderers after the analysis of physical evidence.

The relationship between criminology and state policing became even stronger at the turn of the century, when the medical doctor and university professor Salvatore Ottolenghi, a disciple of Lombroso, published his *L'insegnamento universitario della polizia giudiziaria scientifica: prolusione* (1897), and Alongi wrote the *Manuale di polizia scientifica* (1898). The connection between the two worlds was perfected in 1902,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hounds of the Baskervilles* [1901-2], in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories*, 2 vols (New York: Bantam, 1986), II, pp. 1-146 (p. 3). Piccini, *I ladri di cadaveri*, p. 42.

<sup>48</sup> Piccini, *I ladri di cadaveri*, p. 39.

when Ottolenghi established the School of Scientific Police in Rome.<sup>49</sup> The technical use of fingerprints in crime-solving were developed by Giovanni Gasti, one of Ottolenghi's most important collaborators during the early years of the school, who was responsible for teaching fingerprinting. Another central figure was Pietro Ellero, who gave courses in forensic photography. Ottolenghi himself taught a third technical course, judicial investigation, which focused on the appropriate methods for collecting evidence at the crime scene. The purpose of the school, as Musumeci remarks, was to create a new kind of policeman who investigated crimes in a rational and scientific way, instead of using empirical methods, which were often poorly coordinated and based upon random trends.<sup>50</sup> As early as October 25 1903, the Minister of the Interior, Giuseppe Zanardelli, made attendance of the school mandatory for all new police functionaries.<sup>51</sup> The same period saw the first substantial police reform under Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, following King Umberto I's assassination by an anarchist in Monza in 1900. It brought about an increase in police numbers – Milan's officers, for example, were doubled to 600 – and introduced new tools and training opportunities for police personnel.<sup>52</sup>

It is understandable, then, that in this period Italian writers started devoting increasing attention to the work of the investigative police, as shown by the pioneering Demofilo Italico's *I misteri della polizia* (1884), and to that of professional detectives such as the police delegate De Rosa and the Sherlockian Dick Leslie in Serao's *Il delitto*

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<sup>49</sup> The term 'scientific police' was originally coined by Lombroso in the late 1870s, when he suggested the use of scientific methods, including photography and telegraphy, in order to catch criminals. See Cesare Lombroso, *Sull'incremento del delitto in Italia e sui mezzi per arrestarlo* (Turin: Bocca, 1879), p. 135.

<sup>50</sup> Musumeci, 'Against the Rising Tide of Crime', p. 92.

<sup>51</sup> See Gibson, *Born to Crime*, p. 138.

<sup>52</sup> Giovanna Tosatti, 'La repressione del dissenso politico tra l'età liberale e il fascismo. L'organizzazione della polizia', *Studi Storici* 38.1 (1997), 217-55 (p. 226). See also Richard Bach Jensen, 'Police Reform and Social Reform: Italy from the Crisis of the 1890s to the Giolittian Era', *Criminal Justice History*, 10 (1989), 179-200.

*di via Chiatamone* (1908) and *La mano tagliata* (1912) respectively.<sup>53</sup> The rise of the Italian detective story at the beginning of the twentieth century was prompted precisely by the prodigious success of Sherlock Holmes, whose adventures started to be serialised in 1899 on the pages of the widely read popular journal *La domenica del Corriere* along with those of some of the most important detective writers of the period, including Arthur Morrison, Fergus Hume, Richard Marsh, Maurice Leblanc, and Emma Orczy.

The attempt to replicate Holmes's successful scheme is already apparent in Cesareo Coppini's 'Il delitto dell'inventore', a tale set in London and published in *La domenica del Corriere* in 1903, in which a doctor, who relates the story in the first person, exonerates an old man accused of murder by investigating and solving the mystery of an unidentified body found in a basement.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, in Manuele Oris's 'Un assassinio in ferrovia' (1908), a young amateur detective – 'un semplice dilettante [...] che segue la famosa teoria del metodo induttivo bandita da Sherlock Holmes' – works on a murder case that took place a year before by relying simply on a pearl discovered on the crime scene, which he considers an 'indizio prezioso, una traccia da seguire, finora trascurata, creduta un'inezia di nessun valore dall'autorità inquirente'.<sup>55</sup> In 1905, in *La domenica del Corriere*, two detective stories appeared, which were narrated in the first person and penned by a certain Police Inspector M.P. Eliani, whose real identity is unfortunately unknown, with the subtitle 'dalle memorie di un ispettore di polizia'. In the first story, 'Il

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<sup>53</sup> Demofilo Italico was the pseudonym of the popular writer Girolamo Amato. *I misteri della polizia* (Rome: Perino, 1884) was inspired by real-life criminal cases that took place throughout the country, from Naples to Genoa, during the nineteenth century. The author relies heavily on newspaper and journal articles in his representation of criminal activities. See also Matilde Serao, *Il delitto di via Chiatamone* (Naples: Francesco Perrella, 1908), which was published under the pseudonym of Francesco Sangiorgio and *La mano tagliata* (Florence: Salani, 1912).

<sup>54</sup> Cesareo Coppini, 'Il delitto dell'inventore', *La domenica del Corriere* 17 (1903), 10-2. The identity of Coppini, like that of many other collaborators of *La domenica del Corriere*, who often wrote using pseudonyms, is unknown today.

<sup>55</sup> Manuele Oris, 'Un assassinio in ferrovia', *La domenica del Corriere*, 43 (1908), 14-5 (p. 14).

deviatore della morte', Eliani deals with a terrorist who is spreading panic by provoking a series of rail accidents that kill dozens of people, while in the second one, 'La mano misteriosa', he finds himself dragged into a complicated case involving organised crime after the discovery in a park of an amputated female hand inside a small suitcase.<sup>56</sup>

As can be seen, all these texts are largely concerned with the professional monitoring and identification of bodies. The victims are often discovered dismembered and the investigator has to read his or her identity starting from a small piece of evidence in order to track down the culprits. On the surface, then, these stories of crime and detection confirm, validate, and therefore popularise forensic criminology by demonstrating how its techniques can be employed to uncover criminals. In other words, by valorising the work of expert diagnosticians and body readers, and by employing scientific instruments to explain the pathology of crime – converting the body and the scene of the crime into a text to be deciphered – detective fiction in the popular imagination seems to fulfil that desire for a more rigorous and scientific approach to catching criminals, manifest in public policy by criminology. Accordingly, both the literary and the medical participate in the the process of control of the state over the individual as pointed out by Ginzburg, who recognised in this period the emergence of a 'visible trend consisting of closer control of society by the state, employing a conception of the individual which also was based on small and involuntary traits'.<sup>57</sup>

Though if we analyse the texts more closely, we come to different conclusions. Italian authors actually render scientific approaches to criminality insufficient by exposing their fundamentally inconclusive nature. In fact, they deconstruct these practices by making their utilisation worthless for the actual capture of the criminal. In

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<sup>56</sup> M.P. Eliani, 'Il deviatore della morte', *La domenica del Corriere*, 18-9 (1905), 11-2, 11-2; 'La mano misteriosa', *La domenica del Corriere*, 33-4 (1905), 10-2, 10-3.

<sup>57</sup> Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm', pp. 118-19.

Piccini's *I ladri di cadaveri*, the ability of Lucertolo to identify the criminals does not help him to arrest them: instead, they run away and die in a foreign country under tragic circumstances. In Oris's 'Un assassinio in ferrovia', the amateur detective solves the mystery almost by accident and what was supposed to be a fundamental piece of evidence, a pearl found close to the victim, turns out to be unusable after the detective completes its chemical analysis. In Eliani's 'Il deviatore della morte', the Police Inspector is portrayed while closely analysing the clues: he examines the traces left by a car and measures the distance between the wheels so as to deduce the type of vehicle the terrorists were driving, but all of this provides no insights into the investigation and leads to nowhere. Likewise, in the following 'La mano misteriosa', he relies again heavily on forensic methods and, in regard to the mutilated female hand, he carries out an 'esame minuzioso di ogni singolo dito con una lente d'ingrandimento' that allows him to determine the gender of the victim, her age, and even her provenience.<sup>58</sup> But all of this does not help the investigation; the officer nearly dies in the unsuccessful attempt to defeat the gang, and is finally forced to resign.

The science of detection employed as a cognitive tool is ultimately proven inefficient. Forensic and scientific methods have great visual presence, but the narrative eventually disproves their function. Science contributes little to the knowledge produced in the investigations, and when it does, this knowledge does not lead to the arrest of the culprits and the restoration of the social order. This trend is visible not only in popular texts but also in the work of mainstream writers. A paradigmatic example is Federico De Roberto's *Spasimo* (1897), a text that profoundly reflects on the multifarious and

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<sup>58</sup> Eliani, 'La mano misteriosa', 33, p. 11.

ultimately elusive nature of truth.<sup>59</sup> This novel relates the story of the investigation of Fiorenza D'Arda's murder, a countess found dead in her villa. The police found her while holding her own gun, whereas her lover, the Russian revolutionary Alessio Zakunin, stood by her side. The magistrate Ferpierre investigates the crime and, by going through diaries and letters and by interrogating the protagonists of the drama, he seeks to determine how the crime was perpetrated or whether a real crime was actually committed. A letter written by the victim before her death is taken as proof that it was a suicide and the investigation is closed. Yet this turns out to be false and only through Zakunin's own confession, many years after the event, does the reader discover that he performed a euthanasia type of murder. Ferpierre, described by the author as a positivist, understands the protagonists' psychological trauma, but his investigation eventually produces only a partial truth. Throughout the novel, Ferpierre is frequently described as 'incerto e confuso dinanzi al mistero', and he is eventually left, as are the readers, without the gratification of having reached a satisfactory conclusion by putting together all the pieces of the puzzle.<sup>60</sup>

De Roberto is interested here in the potentially infinite number of truths that a text of detection can open up, with the detective pursuing many different paths and directions that only represent different perceptions of the same ungraspable truth. *Spasimo* is thus a demonstration of the author's increasing uneasiness towards the positivistic claims of the readability of our world. Although around the same time he showed interest in the recent evolution of the detective fiction genre – in a letter sent to Di Giorgi in 1889, he praises

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<sup>59</sup> Federico De Roberto (1861-1927) was a journalist and novelist, one of the most prominent exponents of Italian *verismo*, along with Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana. *I Viceré* (1894), which follows the private history of a noble Sicilian family of Spanish origins from the last period of Bourbon domination to the first decades of the new Kingdom of Italy, remains his most famous novel.

<sup>60</sup> Federico De Roberto, *Spasimo* [1897] (Rome: Donzelli, 2010), p. 17.



‘quella penetrazione psicologica che forma l’originalità di Edgardo Poe e che io mi studio di apprendere dalla sua scuola’ – he utilises the paradigm of detection not to show its power, but rather its fallacy.<sup>61</sup>

The absence of Italian detective stories in the account of those criminologists and critics who sought to construct the canon of the genre must be seen also as a consequence of the confrontational character of texts that constantly challenge the authority of the state by calling into question the power of its institutions and the ability of its functionaries. Unlike much nineteenth-century British and American fictions of crime, which were often seen to fully incorporate and endorse empirical as well as forensic methods of investigation, with the effect of exercising a form of control over the individual, investigator-centred Italian crime fiction critiques the technologies appropriated by positivist criminology for the medicalisation of society and the identification of criminals, offering partial or even failed resolutions to the crimes that they portray, thereby dismantling the reliability of the investigative practices.<sup>62</sup>

### 4.3 Providence and Detection

If we take another closer look at the texts that have been analysed, it is interesting to note that while science is represented as chaotic at best and useless at worst, the old, deep-rooted providential paradigm suddenly resurfaces. In Piccini’s *I ladri di cadaveri*, the death of the criminals seems to have been orchestrated by a higher form of justice, while in Mastriani’s *Il processo Cordier* the crucial clue that allows the investigators to follow

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<sup>61</sup> Aurelio Navarria, *Federico De Roberto. La vita e l’opera* (Catania: Giannotta, 1974), p. 221.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 17.

the right track, a small button found in the hand of the victim, is described as ‘un filo di luce che la giustizia di Dio faceva balenare nel tenebrioso del delitto’.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, in Oris’s ‘Un assassinio in ferrovia’, the journal article recounting the arrest of the murderers describes the pearl as a manifestation of the divine, ‘che la giustizia di Dio ha voluto testimone del delitto, perché un giorno ne riveli il mistero a chi saprà interrogarla’.<sup>64</sup>

Although, as well known, between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, thanks to work such as Cesare Beccaria’s *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764) and Pietro Verri’s *Osservazioni sulla tortura* (1804), human reason gradually began to assert its role as the guiding light of detection and punishment, the presence of the providential paradigm in crime literature remained pervasive. This is not surprising considering the pivotal role that Catholicism played in Italian culture. As Maurizio Ascari argues, the construction of Western morals pivots on the idea of omniscience and the certainty of punishment; accordingly, the idea of divine detection, which is embedded within religious and mythological discourses since ancient times, is coherent with the ideological framework of Christianity which conceived truth as the fruit of revelation rather than as the result of a process.<sup>65</sup> During the last phase of the *Risorgimento*, the Catholic Church’s material strength had rapidly deteriorated. The years that immediately followed the fall of Rome, which became in 1870 the capital of the new Italian nation, were a period of recovery and revival for Italian Catholicism. The papacy refused to recognise Italian control and opened a conflict with the state that distinctly marked the late decades of the nineteenth century. With the restoration of Thomism as the Church’s official philosophy in the 1879 encyclical, the papacy sought to prove that

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<sup>63</sup> Mastriani, *Il processo Cordier*, I, p. 103.

<sup>64</sup> Oris, ‘Un assassinio in ferrovia’, p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, pp. 17, 19.

Catholicism had a convincing explanation for the illness and degeneration that characterised modern society, which were the result of loss of faith and the consequent abandonment of Christian principles.<sup>66</sup> The principle according to which there is no authority except that of God reinstated the superiority of divine law over human law, thus allowing the Church to claim the right to intervene in those areas of the temporal sphere involving moral questions. Towards the end of the century, then, Catholic religiosity saw a resurgence, and its forces began to make themselves strongly felt in the political sphere.<sup>67</sup> As Manlio Graziano argues, in these years ‘Catholicism came to occupy a predominant place in the collective Italian mind, with each point of transition marked by an accompanying weakening of secular culture’.<sup>68</sup>

It comes as no surprise then, that crime literature captured the anxieties and fears that permeate this period of conflict between secularism and religion, reflecting on the tension between human and divine justice. Mastriani’s *Il bettoliere di borgo Loreto* (1880), for instance, relates the story of a trial against Ciccio, an innkeeper wrongly accused of having brutally raped and killed a child. With this novel, Mastriani aims to unmask the problems and fallacies of a justice system that is responsible for convicting a man merely on the basis of ‘semplici indizi e circostanze’, corroborated by a false

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<sup>66</sup> Leo XIII, whose papacy extended from 1878 to 1903, restored Thomism – the Scholastic philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas (1227-74) which harmonised faith and reason – as the Church’s official philosophy in his first encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, in 1879. As Percy Allum explains, the Thomist vision of a hierarchical and ordered world, which begins with God and proceeds through a series of gradations of Being, was given intellectual substance in the famous theory of natural law organised in terms of three levels: divine law, natural law and human positive law. Percy Allum, ‘Catholicism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Baranski and Rebecca J. West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 97-112 (pp. 99-100).

<sup>67</sup> See John Pollard, *Catholicism in Modern Italy: Religion, Society and Politics since 1861* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> Graziano, *The Failure of Italian Nationhood*, p. 133.

testimony carried out by a member of the *camorra*.<sup>69</sup> The brutality of public prosecutors, who frequently force the defendants to confess crimes they did not actually commit, is constantly remarked: the narrator denounces ‘l’autorità, troppo sconfinata, dei giudici istruttori’, for whom ‘basta un semplice *sospetto* in loro su la reità di un individuo per che fabbrichino addosso a questo un processo *ricamato* di circostanze più o meno poetiche’.<sup>70</sup> Unlike *Il processo Cordier*, in which the wrongly accused woman is eventually acquitted thanks to the intervention of the brilliant detective who is able to identify the real culprit, in this novel no private investigator saves Ciccio’s life, who is finally sentenced to death and executed. For the Catholic author, the death sentence constitutes a ‘suprema usurpazione del diritto di Dio’.<sup>71</sup> The fallacy of human law – ‘come potranno dormire in santa pace quei giudici che avranno condannato a morte un innocente?’, comments the narrator – serves here to reinstate the power of divine justice, as the murderer is not eventually able to escape God’s justice.<sup>72</sup> Overwhelmed with grief, he confesses his crime just before dying. Moreover, those who contributed to entrapping Ciccio also die violently. As the author stresses in the end: ‘la impunità per le malvage opere non è per nessuno su questa terra. Presto o tardi si paga il fio del male che si fa’.<sup>73</sup>

Another powerful exploration of the theme of justice is that of Salvatore Farina in his late *Il segreto del nevaio* (1908).<sup>74</sup> The novel opens with the discovery of the corpse of a man who, according to the documents found at the crime scene, is that of the

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<sup>69</sup> Francesco Mastriani, *Il bettoliere di borgo Loreto* (Naples: Stamperia governativa, 1880), p. 114.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>74</sup> Salvatore Farina (1846-1918) was a canonical novelist who gained much success during the 1870s and 1880s. He was often compared to Charles Dickens for his writing style imbued with sentimental humor. *Il segreto del nevaio* (1908) was written after several years of inactivity, and constituted a late attempt to combine elitist and popular elements in order to recover a popularity that he had irremediably lost.

successful violinist Flavio Campana, apparently killed by his friend and fellow musician Fritz Neumeller after a violent altercation. The case goes to trial and Flavio avoids a life sentence thanks to the defence raised by his lawyer. In the second half of the novel, though, the reader gradually finds out that there has been a mistaken identity. The victim is actually Fritz, who was killed by Flavio after he discovered that the musician had sexually abused Irma, Flavio's wife. Written from a strongly Catholic point of view, the novel compares and contrasts the flaws of human law and the infallibility of divine justice. In the first chapter, the innkeeper who has found the corpse tells the magistrate that 'la giustizia che noi facciamo in terra non è nemmeno sorella bastarda di quell'altra...che si fa in alto'.<sup>75</sup> In this novel, crime is still part of a Christian narrative whose inevitable conclusion is punishment, as can be seen in the ending, where Flavio dies while seeking to escape from prison in the attempt to go back to his wife. The death of the criminal brings an end to a complicated matter that human justice proved unable to resolve, stuck between the moral justification of a man who took revenge against the one who abused his wife and the authority of the law, which in turn must also punish him as the murderer.

The fallibility of human justice is further reinforced through an ironic yet harsh critique targeted at criminological science. Psychiatry is defined as 'scienza occulta' and 'portentosa', yet the forensic analysis and the measurement of the defendant's skull do not lead to concrete results and turn out to be useless.<sup>76</sup> In a very powerful passage, Farina accuses positivist criminology of being a pretentious discipline, which draws on deceitful means for its own ends:

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<sup>75</sup> Salvatore Farina, *Il segreto del nevaio* (Milan: De Mohr, 1908), p. 14.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 60.

Quel giorno la perizia psichiatrica si trovò male; a uno a uno i giudici della Corte e quei del popolo l'avrebbero mandata a quel paese; e se fosse stato possibile seduta stante introdurre un comma nel codice penale per punire le supercherie parolaie che i periti giurati fanno in nome della scienza, quel giorno perizia d'accusa e perizia di difesa avrebbero lasciato il Tribunale legate l'una all'altra come per simbolo dell'umana giustizia.<sup>77</sup>

Not only does Farina criticise the science of criminology, but also expresses his own view of criminality, conveyed through the words of the director of the prison. Regarded as 'il migliore degli uomini', he defines inmates as 'gente buona e cattiva, venuta al mondo promettendosi di fare il bene ma che presto s'incontrò nel male e fu di lui più forte'.<sup>78</sup> This view of human nature, which echoes that of the classical school of legal theory in its faith in free will, directly discredits determinism by denying any influence of genetic factors in the explanation of criminality. It is remarkable that in the preface to this novel, Farina identifies a group of texts focusing on the crime-punishment nexus as constituting an autonomous and respectable literary genre, which he calls the 'romanzo giudiziario'.<sup>79</sup> The founding father of this genre, whose examples include Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), and De Marchi's *Il cappello del prete*, is once again Poe, yet not the Poe of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', but rather the Poe of 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843).<sup>80</sup> Farina thus deliberately minimises the role of detection in crime narratives, conversely foregrounding the psychological traits of the characters, and presents a conception of the genre which completely diverges from the one that Niceforo was simultaneously endeavouring to crystallise.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>79</sup> Salvatore Farina, 'Soliloquio di un solitario', in Id., *Il segreto del nevaio*, pp. 1-6.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

In conclusion, this analysis compels us to reconsider and reassess the centrality of the investigation in early Italian crime fiction, as writers tend to stress the fallacy of detection rather than its power. Even in those stories in which justice appears to be done, its course is almost never procedurally correct, and detection is frequently the result of an accident rather than human ingenuity. These stories are often firmly framed within a Christian plot of crime and punishment, with God acting covertly behind the scenes. The progressive secularisation of crime and punishment that characterised the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not imply a full and organic transition from a model of authority ruled by Providence to one ruled by science.

It is difficult not to see in these texts a demonstration of the inherent weakness of the Liberal state and its ruling class, in particular their failure during the four decades since unification to establish hegemony over Italian society and thus inculcate a secular, progressive culture and mentality. Inevitably, as Pollard notes, the Italian ruling class ‘was forced to fall back on the Christian religion as a means of insulating the masses against the “virus of Socialism”’ and, in the longer terms, the unresolved conflict between the state and the Church had the significant outcome of creating the precedent for clerico-moderate alliances.<sup>81</sup>

#### 4.4 The Female Sleuth

All through the nineteenth-century in Italy, the role of the detective was ostensibly designated as masculine by society. This is not only because the police were an entirely male body until 1956, but rather because, at the time, as Mori points out, the scientific

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<sup>81</sup> Pollard, *Catholicism in Modern Italy*, p. 42.

and technical specification of intellectual activity was ‘a quality of male distinction that enjoyed broad support in the cultured classes’.<sup>82</sup> Professionalism and masculinity largely intertwined and overlapped in late nineteenth-century Italian society: accordingly, the typical qualities of the detective such as hyper-rationality or the utilisation of violence were culturally coded as specifically masculine.

This does not seem enough to explain the absence of professional female investigators in early Italian crime fiction, especially if we consider that in Great Britain they made their debut in popular literature as early as 1864.<sup>83</sup> We must necessarily place women in the historical and socio-political context of post-unification Italy. In a country strongly imbued with Catholicism, both politicians and clergymen were united in their opinion of women’s ‘proper’ role, that of ‘mother and husband’s helpmate, with the attendant virtues of modesty, submission and sacrifice’.<sup>84</sup> As Ursula Fanning has argued, from the Risorgimento onwards a strong connection was made ‘in official rhetoric between the terms “donna” and “patria”. Women are intended to “fare gli italiani” in more ways than one’.<sup>85</sup> Prescriptions around maternity and motherhood are to be found in the more scientific texts of the period such as Lombroso’s *La donna delinquente: la prostituta e la donna normale* (1893) and Paolo Mantegazza’s *Fisiologia della donna* (1893). For them, a woman’s role as mother is ordained by her very physiology and it is so all-

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<sup>82</sup> Mori, ‘Becoming Policemen in Nineteenth-Century Italy’, p. 114.

<sup>83</sup> Many American and British scholars have looked at the way in which nineteenth-century female detectives defy the patriarchal constraints imposed upon them. See Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Joseph A. Kestner, *Sherlock’s Sisters: The British Female Detective 1864-1913* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Carla T. Kungl, *Creating the Fictional Female Detective: The Sleuth Heroines of British Women Writers 1890-1940* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006); Lisa Dresner, *The Female Investigator in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007); Adrienne E. Gavin, ‘Feminist Crime Fiction and Female Sleuths’, in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, pp. 258-69.

<sup>84</sup> Allum, ‘Catholicism’, p. 103.

<sup>85</sup> Ursula Fanning, ‘Maternal Prescriptions and Descriptions in Post-Unification Italy’, in *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy: Between Private and Public Spheres* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 13-37 (p. 14).



encompassing that it takes up to her whole being. Maternity thus provided the key to understanding women's stunted biological, psychological, and intellectual development. The nineteenth-century Italian woman, as Fanning concludes, 'is essentially incompatible with intellectual pursuits'.<sup>86</sup> The spread of the ideology of female domesticity in the post-unification period is reflected in the dramatic decrease, in comparison with the past, in the number of 'active' women in the Italian censuses of 1881, 1901, and 1936, which saw the rising numbers of housewives and consequently the masculinisation of the 'active' population.<sup>87</sup> In addition, the feminist movement was barely active in Italy before the twentieth century; it was restricted in its appeal, poorly organised, and failed in its attempts to gain women the right to vote in national elections, which was finally granted only in 1946.<sup>88</sup>

Not surprisingly, from a professional point of view, there were many restrictions for middle-class women, who were even forced to cease working if they married. Acceptable professions were limited to book-keeping, secretarial work, working for a small business which accepted female members of staff, philanthropic work, and primary school-teaching.<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, the most entrenched opposition was faced by women wishing to practice law. In this respect, the example of Lydia Poët, the first woman with a law degree, who was denied the right to practice at the Bar in 1883, is revealing. The idea that women should practice law was indeed very problematic given their own legal

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>87</sup> Silvana Patriarca, 'Gender Trouble: Women and the Making of Italy's "Active Population", 1861-1936', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 3.2 (1998), 144-63 (p. 147).

<sup>88</sup> Camilla Ravera, *Breve storia del movimento femminile in Italia* (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1978), p. 15; Annarita Buttafuoco, *Questioni di cittadinanza: donne e diritti sociali nell'Italia liberale* (Siena: Protagon editori toscani, 1995), p. 26.

<sup>89</sup> Katharine Mitchell, 'Sorelle in arte (e politica): The "Woman Question" and Female Solidarity at the Fin de Siècle', in *Women and Gender in Post Unification Italy: Between Private and Public Spheres*, ed. by Katharine Mitchell and Helena Sanson (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 197-223 (p. 213).

inferiority. A bill which would allow them to do so, presented in parliament in 1899 by the Republican deputy Ettore Socci was defeated by only a narrow margin. A second compromise bill, opening certain legal professions to women, was passed in parliament in 1904 but never reached the statute books owing to the end of the legislature.<sup>90</sup>

Considering the hostile political and cultural climate surrounding women and professionalism between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which made the idea of a female sleuth almost unthinkable, the few exceptions acquire even more relevance, allowing us to examine the ways in which authors explore the contemporary tensions between society's underlying domestic ideology and women's entry into the work force. The specific cultural and gender issues that these texts raise are variously and differently addressed by authors. While the work of Carolina Invernizio is marked by strong ambiguity towards the role of women in society, the stories of male writers such as Epifanio Musci-Nielli and Franco Bello remarkably destabilise apparently coded and innate gendered constructions, symbolising the gradual emergence of the model of the twentieth-century woman.

Due to her ambivalent and sometimes even conservative view on womanhood, the work of Invernizio has been systematically overlooked in those books of Italian women writers published over the last forty years that have reintroduced into the canon forgotten but certainly more progressive female authors such as Neera (the pseudonym of Anna Radius Zuccari), Marchesa Colombi, and Matilde Serao.<sup>91</sup> Although it is true, as

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<sup>90</sup> Perry R. Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 21.

<sup>91</sup> Carolina Invernizio (1851-1916) was arguably the most popular Italian writer between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. She made her debut in 1876 and wrote more than a hundred novels that mingle crime, sensationalism, and melodrama. In her stories, which pivot on guilty secrets and where coincidences multiply, she depicts deeply contrasting psychological types, staging an inexorable duel between the incompatible principles of good and evil. Amongst the few studies devoted to her writing, see *Carolina Invernizio, Matilde Serao, Liala*, ed. by Umberto Eco (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1979); Guido Davico Bonino and Giovanna Ioli,

Katharine Mitchell argues, that these writers engage much more than Invernizio with ‘the issues with which the moderate emancipationists were concerned, such as better access to education and the professions’, it is also true that Invernizio’s enormous popularity and appeal inevitably and greatly influenced her female readers, teaching them how to deal with their potentials, limitations, and predicaments as women, wives, and mothers.<sup>92</sup> It is significant that in 1890 she was asked to address the *Società Operaia di Napoli* on the subject ‘Le operaie italiane’: while conceding that the situation had improved and that women must now be respected for their work, she was concerned about the condition of women workers and denounced their subjection and exploitation and recognised their need for escapism.<sup>93</sup>

Potentially, Invernizio’s narrative is very subversive, entirely written ‘for women, about women’, as Anna Laura Lepschy puts it, and constantly concerned with crime and deviancy.<sup>94</sup> She repeatedly chooses to investigate a woman’s story, and explores the various roles open to women of her time, whether seen within the boundaries of the heterosexual love relationship, or in the mother-daughter dyad as both mother and daughter. In many of her novels, we find courageous and intelligent female characters taking on the role of unofficial investigators in the attempt to defend the honour and protect the stability of the family. A paradigmatic example is *I ladri dell’onore* (1894): Gin, a member of the sub-proletariat, is an unmarried girl who has been taken advantage of by a wealthy older man with whom she has fallen in love. She discovers herself to be

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Carolina Invernizio. *Il romanzo d’appendice* (Turin: Gruppo Editoriale Forma, 1983); Andrea Cantelmo, *Carolina Invernizio e il romanzo d’appendice* (Florence: Atheneum, 1992).

<sup>92</sup> Katharine Mitchell, *Italian Women Writers: Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism 1870-1910* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Carolina Invernizio, ‘Le operaie italiane’, in *Nero per signora*, ed. by Riccardo Reim (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1986), pp. 257-75.

<sup>94</sup> Anna Laura Lepschy, ‘The Popular Novel 1850-1920’, in *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy*, ed. by Sharon Wood and Letizia Panizza (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 177-89 (p. 177).

pregnant and when she has the baby, the child is then passed on to its father to be raised in luxury. Childbirth here robs the mother of her sense of self and leaves her in a state of limbo. She spends the rest of the narrative searching for her lost daughter in order to reconstitute her amputated self.

In the narrowed territory of detective fiction, an excellent example is *Nina, la poliziotta dilettante* (1909), often mentioned by Italian scholars as the first detective story written by a woman. Nina Palma is a young, beautiful, working-class woman who is described by the author as a ‘verGINE bruna, così onesta e fiera nella sua umile condizione’.<sup>95</sup> She is engaged and soon to be married to a young count, who is so much eager to visit her every night that he takes the risk to walking down the dangerous streets of Turin in which Nina lives, where ‘un galantuomo non è più sicuro di passare di notte [...] senza venire aggredito, accoltellato’.<sup>96</sup> One night, when the count is coming back home, he is surprised by an unknown delinquent and brutally murdered. Nina’s whole life is suddenly turned upside down. The policemen, who are obviously male and even more obviously unable to make any progress, suspect her involvement in the homicide, so she decides to investigate the case on her own, convinced that with the help of God she will be able to track down the real criminals and carry out her revenge: ‘io sola scoprirò la colpevole [...] e non avrò per essa né indulgenza né pietà [...] Dio mi aiuterà a riuscire’.<sup>97</sup> In order to accomplish this, she feigns a suicide and joins the family of her dead fiancée under the disguise of a male, blonde servant, as she is initially convinced of the responsibility of the countess, the aunt of her beloved. As the story unfolds and the sub-plots proliferate, Nina’s investigations are repeatedly frustrated and she progressively realises the impossibility of disclosing the real truth. She continuously pursues the wrong

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<sup>95</sup> Carolina Invernizio, *Nina, la poliziotta dilettante* (Florence: Salani, 1909), p. 10.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

paths, follows the wrong clues, and draws attention every time to the wrong culprit. Although she repeats to herself that ‘io son la poliziotta che ha il sacro diritto di scoprire tutta la verità’ she has neither the disciplinary power nor the intellectual capacity for solving the mystery, and she even acknowledges this towards the end of the novel: ‘che debole poliziotta sono io dunque, se mi lascio abbattere così’.<sup>98</sup>

When it was first published, *Nina, la poliziotta dilettante* was intended to be a sort of Italian counterpart of the adventures of Holmes. The publishing house ostensibly hoped to capitalise on both the increasing popularity of the detective novel and the emergence of a vast female readership by immediately informing the reader of the books’ unique features. On the book’s cover, Nina is foregrounded and depicted by Carlo Chiostri with her fist under her chin. This is clearly related to the iconography of the thinker, emphasising the cerebral qualities of the detective. Interestingly, this pose, which contributes to the already masculinised aspect of the character, is the same that Chiostri had used before to illustrate Holmes on the cover of *La maledizione dei Baskerville* (1907). Such an attention to advertise the book as a detective story is profoundly contradicted by the content of the story. Unlike what scholars have repeatedly asserted, this can hardly be defined as a detective story. The detection that Nina accomplishes is rudimentary. She does little to ascertain the truth, which comes up abruptly after a series of twists, turns, and sensational revelations in the typical fashion of the author. The perpetrator of the crime finally confesses, and Nina forgives him shortly before he dies.

In this novel, the woman detective is not helpful in articulating women writers’ struggle for authority. Initially, she asserts that, when the culprit is discovered, she will disappear ‘in un convento a pregare, aspettando il momento di riunirmi a lui per

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 83, 135.

sempre'.<sup>99</sup> Instead, she finally gets married to a distant cousin of the victim who looks exactly like him, once again upholding society's view of the proper role of women. Nina provides little challenge to the cultural boundaries limiting women's role, and the final effect of the text is that of re-establishing gender hierarchies. Although the novel does not reify a standard of male position and power contrasted with female inferiority – after all, men are always obtuse puppets in the hands of cunning and malicious women – *Invernizio* seems to support a patriarchal view of the world, in which pretty young women, whatever their profession and social position, are best suited by ladylike behaviour and advantageous marriages. The reader's contradictory expectations of detectives' active behaviour and women's passive acceptance are here resolved in favour of the older, established bias.

The consistent and unassailable absence of female investigators created by female writers in early Italian crime fiction testifies to the strength of gender-linked stereotyping, as well as the difficulty to challenge women's prescribed role in society through stories considered inherently deviant and possibly subversive. The examples of the female detectives invented by Epifanio Mussi-Nielli and Franco Bello are thus particularly intriguing, whether this implies feminist sympathies or a mere attempt to broaden their readership. Gina Dallosta is the protagonist of the short story 'Un'istruttoria', which appeared in *La domenica del Corriere* in 1907, penned by Epifanio Mussi-Nielli, a lawyer who occasionally ventured into the territory of literary fiction.<sup>100</sup> The story displays a young and intelligent girl who manages to exculpate her lover who has been wrongly accused of murder and convicted. She does not perform any particular kind of investigation – albeit she deduces the name of the culprit by discovering a revelatory letter

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>100</sup> Epifanio Mussi-Nielli, 'Un'istruttoria', *La domenica del Corriere*, 9 (1907), 12-5.

– but she stages a fake séance in order to lay a trap to the murderer, who very conveniently confesses his misdeed. What is interesting here is that Gina is one of the earliest female characters to act specifically as a detective consultant in a disciplinary way. The examining magistrate is aware of her plans to capture the criminal and helps her in accomplishing the task. Moreover, although she ends up marrying her lover and, allegedly, will never deal with a criminal case again, she intends to show her ability and detective skills by writing a treatise on ‘L’utilità della collaborazione femminile nelle indagini di polizia giudiziaria’, through which she underlines the alternative (to men) contribution that women can offer in judicial investigations.

The second example is Anna Stephenson, an American-born millionaire and widower who seeks to fulfil her life purpose by catching criminals and solving mysteries in the Italy that has just entered the Belle Époque.<sup>101</sup> Invented by Franco Bello, she appears in four short stories collected in the book *Anna Stephenson, la donna poliziotto: avventure straordinarie* (1909) as well as in a comedy of five acts, written by Bello with the aid of Giovanni Carini, which was represented in the Adriano theatre in Rome in 1908, and was then collected in the volume *La donna poliziotto: commedia in cinque atti* (1909).<sup>102</sup>

Slightly over thirty, Anna is a college-educated, independent, physically fearless, and highly observant upper-class woman who possesses a strongly humanitarian view of life and investigates crimes and catches delinquents to make the world a better place in which to live: ‘*non per la sete del male io compio la mia missione, ma per il bene che*

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<sup>101</sup> Maurizio Pistelli explains, with reason, the choice of using an American-born character with his ‘volontà di assecondare i gusti di un pubblico condizionato da una diffusa esterofilia’. Pistelli, *Un secolo in giallo*, pp. 60-1.

<sup>102</sup> Franco Bello, *Anna Stephenson, la donna poliziotto: avventure straordinarie* (Milan: Floritta, 1909); Franco Bello and Giovanni Carini, *La donna poliziotto: commedia in cinque atti* (Milan: Barbini, 1909). The comedy reproduces with very small changes the first short-story contained in the book, called ‘L’ottomana misteriosa’.

dovrebbe affratellare i popoli'.<sup>103</sup> The Italian Ministry of Interior is so impressed by her personality and skills that she is given disciplinary power to act as a police officer. Her investigations take place throughout Italy, from Milan to Naples, and involve both thefts (in 'L'ottomana misteriosa' and 'Il bambino pignorato') and murders (in 'La moglie dell'avvocato' and 'Il teschio rivelatore').<sup>104</sup> She considers herself unusually hardened for a woman and therefore willing to accept dangerous cases: 'vorrei esser nato uomo per aver potuto seguire la mia vocazione. Io sarei stato il più abile e il più astuto dei poliziotti'.<sup>105</sup> Devoted to her profession, she keeps her private life private, behaves and is treated professionally, and is admired for her detective ability by her clients and the police. She carries a gun, is intelligent and active, and is herself threatened with violence and murder. Her being an actual member of the police, like Baroness Orcy's Lady Molly, does not work against her socially, as she maintains her position in society while exercising such a masculine profession. Moreover, these short stories acknowledge a positive correlation between her gender and her profession, as she can remain feminine and respectable as well as successful and professionally self-assured. She is very attractive to men and, on one occasion, she resorts to stereotypical but powerful feminine wiles such as exploiting her beauty to make a man fall in love with her and confess his crime.

Anna reveals a whole spectrum of investigative approaches and talents. First, like Sherlock Holmes, she credits herself with making minute observations, deliberate reflections, and inferences from evidence, although she comments that Holmes's adventures 'sono basate sull'inverosimile e sul fantastico, mentre le mie saranno

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<sup>103</sup> Franco Bello, 'La moglie dell'avvocato', in Id., *Anna Stephenson*, pp. 147-223 (p. 219). Emphasis in the text.

<sup>104</sup> Bello, 'Il bambino pignorato', in Id., *Anna Stephenson*, pp. 78-144; Bello, 'Il teschio rivelatore', in Id., *Anna Stephenson*, pp. 224-64.

<sup>105</sup> Franco Bello, 'L'ottomana misteriosa', in Id., *Anna Stephenson*, pp. 3-77 (p. 12).



realmente vissute'.<sup>106</sup> She does not mistakenly overlook important clues or improperly overvalue apparent but irrelevant items. She is presented as very good at disguise, she makes sarcastic comments on the inefficiency of the police – especially when an officer overlooks an 'insignificante e inutile indizio' – and displays deep knowledge in chemistry and medicine.<sup>107</sup>

What is striking here is the way in which Anna transforms culturally coded female knowledge into a crime-tool to solving crimes. Entrenched cultural images of femininity, including adeptness at disguise, an acute eye for those telling details which appear to others as insignificant, and a driving curiosity, become instruments of female empowerment. In 'Il teschio rivelatore' her purely feminine and often criticised lack of discretion is turned into a good advantage that allows her to obtain professional success: she kindly admits that 'è vero ch'io peccai d'indiscrezione [...] son donna, e per giunta poliziotto'.<sup>108</sup> She, by virtue of her social training as a lady and her knowledge of the normal functioning of the household, is able to find and interpret clues that male detectives neglect, such as the identification of the fragment of a letter or the recognition of the scent of a particular perfume. This is exemplified in 'Il bambino pignorato', in which she deduces that an apparently respectable couple is actually formed of a woman and another woman disguised under male clothes by examining their luggage and smelling the scent of perfume they were both wearing.

In conclusion, the fact that these women participate directly and personally in the exposure of crime establishes a degree of proto-feminist advocacy that must not be minimised. Even when the female detective is working to support or clear a partner, as in Mussi-Nielli's 'Un'istruttoria', and even if she abandons the profession after her aims are

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>107</sup> Bello, 'L'ottomana misteriosa', in Id., *Anna Stephenson*, pp. 21, 23; Bello, 'Il teschio rivelatore', in Id., *Anna Stephenson*, p. 232.

<sup>108</sup> Bello, 'Il teschio rivelatore', in Id., *Anna Stephenson*, p. 258.

realised, the female sleuth is still a professional pursuing a career. Moreover, female sleuths solve cases where male detectives, who are invariably proven incompetent, ignorant, or obstructionist, fail. The concept of a woman exercising power through her gaze is extraordinarily potent for the time, even though this existed in a fictional world and not in reality. In this period, the detective was seen as a profession exclusively suited for men, as it required the utilization of reason. These female detectives, then, who are empowered primarily through rationality, are gender-blending in terms of patriarchal constructions of femininity. By using the logic and intelligence necessary to any detective, along with their own specialised knowledge, female detectives negotiated within societal structures a specifically female authority and professional identity. They show how stereotypically female traits, including knowledge of the domestic sphere and innate curiosity, could be turned into functional weapons that allow them to transfer their power from the private to the public sphere.

As we have seen, late nineteenth and early-twentieth century detective fiction has conventionally been credited with being conservative and comforting, in which cases are eventually neatly solved and moral order is restored. These female detectives, however few, operate subversively; when they bring justice, moral certainties may be re-established, but gender role expectations are inevitably up turned and broken down. The emphasis on ratiocinative processes strongly runs counter to such received constructions of the feminine as non-logical, posing a threat to male empowerment and male-identified institutions such as the Court of Assize or the detective police. By validating women's areas of knowledge as valuable, writers expand roles for women in society. They make their protagonists act in ways that are acceptable to society so as to broaden what is considered acceptable. These women may work within prescribed roles, but it is the knowledge originating from those roles that allows them to accomplish their task and

restore the social order.

### Conclusion

In the years in which Alfredo Niceforo produced his essays on the detective story by celebrating authors such as Poe, Gaboriau, and Conan Doyle, stressing the centrality of forensic science within its development, Italian writers variously experimented with detective fiction's conventions. Although, as we have seen, a conspicuous number of Italian detective-centred stories appeared in this period, none of them found their way into the pages of critics and criminologists. In the 1930s, when critical debates on the *giallo* started to thrive, silence continued to surround not only popular authors but even mainstream novelists who had ventured into the territory of the detective story such as Federico De Roberto and Salvatore Farina.

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century crime texts are in fact unconventional, often radically antiauthoritarian, and profoundly subversive, populated by literary sleuths who act very differently from the typical infallible and trustworthy detectives in the vein of Sherlock Holmes. The strong disbelief towards the credibility and reliability of the Italian police force, often depicted as violent and corrupt, is accompanied by a general distrust towards the application of science in criminal cases.<sup>109</sup> The stories I have considered apparently relate detection and science to the process of control of the state, advocating the utilisation of forensic methods to exercise control over the individual and to make the world and people entirely legible. In reality, a closer analysis has shown how they bring

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<sup>109</sup> As well-known, the police are also depicted as incompetent in Sherlock Holmes stories and many other Anglophone detective stories thereafter, leaving the state apparatus for administering justice to look rather foolish in the Anglophone canon too. Nonetheless, this happens for the different reason of the policemen's inferior intelligence relative to Holmes (or equivalent private investigator), rather than any charge of corruption or violence being levelled at them.

into question the ability of such technologies to provide knowledge in criminal investigations, and eventually replace justice in the hands of the divinity, ultimately dismantling the form of normalisation and total authority over society dreamt and promoted by the state. In addition, the appearance of female detectives in the first decade of the twentieth century, who use their power of reasoning to restore the social order, constitutes a further menace to male empowerment and to the highly masculine-gendered Italian public sphere.

As we have seen, the history of Italy from its unification to the beginning of the Fascist dictatorship – that is, using the words of Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, ‘the history of a state in search of a nation’ – is marked by a continual struggle for control and authority between the government and the Church, secularism and religion.<sup>110</sup> Yet this period was also characterised by the re-emergence of occult disciplines and practices such as spiritualism and mesmerism, which took part in the conflict by casting doubt on traditional Christian values and by opening a long, harsh, and contradictory confrontation with science. The next chapter considers the role of literature in this conflict and focuses precisely on the complex relationship between science, religion, and occultism, revealing the wide spectrum of interactions between detection, which epitomises progress and the force of reason, and the destabilising element of the supernatural.

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<sup>110</sup> Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: on Making Italians (1860-1920)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 1.

## Chapter 5. DETECTION AND THE SUPERNATURAL

The cultural phase that spans the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century was seen for a long time as the triumph of the empiricist method and a materialist approach to reality, with science gradually but inexorably supplanting religion and the occult as the ultimate authority for understanding the natural world. Recent scholarship has instead re-defined this period as ambivalent and problematic, marked by a pervasive tension between the rational and irrational, in which apparently contradictory fields such as science, technology, and magical and supernatural thinking interacted and intertwined.<sup>1</sup> The rise of occultism throughout the nineteenth century was not merely a reaction against the increasingly dogmatic materialism of science. The relationship between science and occultism was, in fact, much more complex and dialectical. Positivist science aimed to deprive the world of its mysterious and supernatural aura, exploring phenomena that had been previously ascribed to superstition and religion, thus engendering a new form of syncretism. It was precisely the development of science and technology, then, that helped to foster the resurgence of popular, discarded beliefs and traditions, which were revaluated in the light of recent discoveries and reassessed within a new, apparently more scientific system of knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritual and Psychical Research in England 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology, and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, ed. by Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). With regard to the Italian context, see Clara Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa: magnetismo e ipnotismo nell'Ottocento italiano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983); Simona Cigliana, *La seduta spiritica: dove si racconta come e perché i fantasmi hanno invaso la modernità* (Rome: Fazi, 2007); Id., *Due secoli di fantasmi: case infestate, tavoli giranti, apparizioni, spiritisti, magnetizzatori e medium* (Rome: Edizioni mediterranee, 2018); Morena Corradi, *Spettri d'Italia. Scenari del fantastico nella pubblicistica postunitaria milanese* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2016), pp. 41-82.

Animal magnetism, or mesmerism, which in the view of its inventor, the eighteenth-century German doctor Franz Mesmer, represented a material influence that bodies, animate or inanimate, exercise upon each other through the mediation of a universal and extremely fine fluid, was refashioned as hypnotism in the 1840s by the Scottish surgeon James Braid, who demonstrated in his *Neurypnology, or the Rationale of Nervous Sleep Considered in Relation with Animal Magnetism* (1843) that hypnotic sleep could be induced by the simple fixation on a luminous object.<sup>2</sup> Interest in animal magnetism in Italy is originally traceable to the first half of the nineteenth century but grew enormously in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>3</sup> In the 1880s, hypnotism acquired an increasingly prominent yet controversial role in the discourse of crime, when lively debates about who could be hypnotised and the ramifications this had on human will and autonomous agency escalated.<sup>4</sup> Braid's discovery, which contributed to shifting the interest of scientists from the hypnotists and their apparently preternatural powers to the hypnotised and their abnormal psyches, provided an important thread connecting mesmerism with spiritualism. These two definitions frequently intertwined and overlapped in the nineteenth century, being used to encompass a range of practices dedicated to crossing or erasing the boundary between matter and the spirit, the physical

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Works on animal magnetism include Francesco Orioli, *Del mesmerismo lettere critiche* (Bologna: Annesio Nobili, 1817); Angelo Cogeina and Francesco Orioli, *Fatti relativi a mesmerismo e cure mesmeriche con una prefazione storico-critica* (Corfù: Tipografia del governo, 1842); Bartolomeo Corrizzato, *Considerazioni storico-critiche sul mesmerismo: memoria* (Bassano: Baseggio, 1847); Giovanni Caroli, *Del magnetismo animale, ossia Mesmerismo in ordine alla regione e alla rivelazione* (Bologna: Giacomo Monti al sole, 1858).

<sup>4</sup> In the late 1880s, medical interest in hypnotism focused on who could be hypnotised and under what circumstances: while Jean-Martin Charcot and his disciples at the Paris school maintained that only the already hysterical (mainly female patients) were hypnotisable, and that hypnosis was a manifestation of illness, the exponents of the Nancy school, including Ambroise-Auguste Liébaux and Hippolyte Bernheim, challenged the notion that hypnosis was rare or pathological, claiming that everyone was hypnotisable under the right conditions, and that suggestibility was a universal human condition. Italian scientists followed, albeit cautiously, the Nancy school. See Patrizia Guarnieri, 'Theatre and Laboratory: Medical Attitudes to Animal Magnetism in Late-Nineteenth-Century Italy', in *Studies in the History of Alternative Medicines*, ed. by Roger Cooter (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 118-39.

and the metaphysical, the living and the dead. They shared the common ambition to scrutinise the depths of an invisible energy underlying and governing material existence. Spiritualism saw a resurgence, first in the United States and then in Europe, after the famous events that took place in 1848 at the house of John D. Fox, a farmer who lived in the State of New York, in which what seemed to be the spirit of a pedlar who had been murdered in that building managed to establish communication with one of the farmer's daughters. Spiritualism contributed to the birth of the so-called psychical research, that is the attempt to understand and explain the supernatural with the instruments of science. The revival of spiritualism took hold in Italy in the early 1850s, but reached its peak in the 1890s, when renowned scientists started devoting increasing attention to the investigation of poltergeists and ghosts through the application of a rigorously rational approach.<sup>5</sup> Lombroso, who turned to spiritualism in 1891, hypothesises that certain apparently spiritual phenomena actually pertain to the realm of matter, which he calls the 'stato radiante', and because of their radioactive qualities ghosts can be positively measured and weighed by science.<sup>6</sup>

The Catholic community on one hand – threatened by the emergence of beliefs that were replacing a set of Christian values that were in crisis – and the press and publishing industry on the other, played a major role in fostering interest in the occult. While Giovanni Giuseppe Franco, one of the leading spokesmen of the official organisation of the Jesuits, the *Civiltà Cattolica*, strongly denounced spiritualism and hypnotism as

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<sup>5</sup> Massimo Biondi, *Tavoli e medium: storia dello spiritismo in Italia* (Rome: Gremese, 1988), pp. 14-5. See Eugenio Gabrielli, *Ipnatismo e spiritismo* (Bari: Pasini, 1892); Angelo Brofferio, *Per lo spiritismo* (Milan: Briola, 1892); Cesare Baudi di Vesme, *Storia dello spiritismo* 2 vols (Turin: Roux Frassati e co., 1896-97); Pasquale Turiello, *Dello spiritismo in Italia* (Naples: Golia, 1898); Armando Pappalardo, *Spiritismo* (Milan: Hoepli, 1898); Enrico Morselli, *Psicologia e spiritismo* (Turin: Bocca, 1908); Cesare Lombroso, *Ricerche sui fenomeni ipnotici e spiritici* (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1909).

<sup>6</sup> Cesare Lombroso, 'Eusapia Paladino e lo spiritismo', *La lettura*, 7.11 (1907), 715-23 (p. 723).

diabolical and dangerous practices, journalists and publishers were ready to capitalise on the increasing interest in the interactions between science and occultism.<sup>7</sup> Both popular journals such as *La domenica del Corriere* and more mainstream titles such as *La lettura* featured several scientific articles on hypnotism, telepathy, and spiritualism, along with amateur accounts of séances and narrations of supernatural events, while the publishing house Sonzogno included divulgative and didactic pamphlets focusing on various aspects of the occult in its popular collection ‘Biblioteca del popolo’.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding repeated scholarly claims to the contrary, in these times of uncertainty Italian literature eagerly and variously responded to the enormous interest in the unaccomplished disjunction of science and the occult, rational and irrational practices, thriving on and shaping the contemporary heated debates over the existence of ghosts and vampires, metempsychosis and witchcraft, psychic and mesmeric powers. This chapter thus explores the wide spectrum of intersections between crime, detection, and the supernatural that typifies late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian literature. In so doing, I will bring to light the influential yet largely unacknowledged role that Italian popular fiction played in the shaping and dissemination of those ‘often *hidden, rejected, and oppositional* beliefs and practices’ that Christopher Partridge groups under the term

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<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Giuseppe Franco, *Gli spiriti e le tenebre: racconto storico delle pratiche dell’odierno spiritismo* (Prato: Tipografia Giachetti, 1882); *L’ipnotismo tornato di moda* (Prato: Tipografia Giachetti, 1886).

<sup>8</sup> Raffaele Pirro, ‘Miraggio e telepatia’, *La domenica del corriere*, 46 (1900), 2; Carlo Alzona, ‘La stregheria e la scienza moderna’, *La domenica del corriere*, 28 (1901) 4; E.H., ‘Un sorprendente caso di ipnotismo’, *La domenica del corriere*, 11 (1902) 9-10; Anonymous, ‘Nel mondo degli spiriti’, *La lettura*, 3.12 (1903), 1137-9; Cesare Lombroso, ‘Sui fenomeni spiritici e la loro interpretazione’, *La lettura*, 6.11 (1906), 978. In the preface of the book *Nel mondo dei misteri con Eusapia Paladino* (1907), Luigi Barzini, a journalist of the *Corriere della Sera* who had participated in several séances with the medium Eusapia Paladino and Lombroso, wrote that ‘mai come in questo momento l’interesse del pubblico è stato richiamato sui cosiddetti fenomeni spiritici. [...] Questo fatto è dovuto a due personalità eminenti: una della scienza e l’altra del giornalismo contemporaneo’. Luigi Barzini, ‘Premessa’, in *Nel mondo dei misteri con Eusapia Paladino* [1907] (Milan: Longanesi, 1984), pp. 7-8 (p. 7).



‘occulture’, with which he defines the survival and re-articulation of the various manifestations and ramifications of the occult in periods of secularisation.<sup>9</sup>

The first section of this chapter considers how and the extent to which the development of occult investigative forms such as hypnotism, telepathy, and spiritualism helped mid nineteenth-century crime fiction to re-incorporate and revitalise the old, deep-seated paradigm of providential detection, which gradually loses its privileged relationship with the occult world once the end of the century approaches. I will then look at how the tension between scientism and occultism is differently articulated within a variety of texts that either reinforce or challenge the diagnostic power of science, opening up to metaphysical interpretations of the world. The last section explores the way in which the often overlooked theme of vampirism is absorbed into popular fiction with the effect of ambiguously exposing specifically Italian fears and anxieties concerning politics, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, this chapter charts a complex, multifaceted, and heterogeneous yet largely unexplored literary landscape that lay suspended between two competing systems of values whose underlying tension signals the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of building a new, progressive, and finally secularised Italy.

### 5.1 Supernatural Detection

Considering the enormous impact that Catholicism has had on Italian culture, it is unsurprising that the complicated debate in which Italy engaged over the supernatural in the nineteenth century was deeply affected by religion. The Roman Catholic Church felt

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 68. Emphasis in the text. The author defines popular culture as ‘a key sacralizing factor’ in the formation and dissemination of contemporary occultural thought. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, p. 119. For a rich and extensive study of the occulture in 1960s Italy see Camilletti, *Italia lunare*.

undermined by the rise of spiritualism and other occult practices, and it constantly sought to disprove their validity and plausibility, with the effect, as Massimo Biondi underlines, of rendering the subject unavoidable.<sup>10</sup> Though most Italians thought of themselves as expanding or improving their religious practices with the séance, not replacing them. The attempts to combine two worldviews so apparently irreconcilable as occultism and Catholicism were thus far from sporadic. Excellent examples are the works of writers such as Antonio Fogazzaro, and spiritualists and practitioners such as Enrico Dalmazzo, who published his *Lo spiritismo in senso cristiano* in 1889 under the pseudonym of Teofilo Coreni and founded the journal *Luce e ombra* in 1900 in order to promote a form of Christian spiritualism that owed much to the lessons of the French thinker, Allan Kardec.<sup>11</sup> Even the scientist Francesco Guidi was convinced of the capacity of science to explain the mystery of the world without renouncing an essentially Catholic standpoint: he defines magnetism as a God's gift, and interprets spiritualism not as the return of the dead from the grave, which would bring into question the miracle of Christ's resurrection, but, instead, as the manifestation of the mediumistic powers of spiritualists: 'moltissime persone, anche di buona fede, attribuiscono tali fenomeni all'intervento degli spiriti. [...] noi siamo convinti che non agli spiriti dei trapassati ma allo spirito dei mediums, o veggenti, si debbano attribuire le misteriose risposte'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Biondi, *Tavoli e medium*, p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> See Fogazzaro e il soprannaturale: *pagine di narrativa fra spiritismo e spiritualismo*, ed. by Gilberto Finzi (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 1996); Marianna Bringhenti, 'Antonio Fogazzaro presidente della Società di Studi Psicici: un documento inedito sul rapporto tra spiritismo, religione, scienza', *Atti dell'Accademia roveretana degli Agiati*, 255, VIII, V (2005), pp. 153-71; Foni, *Alla fiera dei mostri*, p. 40. Teofilo Coreni, *Lo spiritismo in senso cristiano* (Rome: Unione tipografico-editrice, 1889), pp. 7-8. Allan Kardec, the pen name of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, crafted a more Christian-influenced spiritualism that also embraced reincarnation and stood vehemently against the rising materialism of the nineteenth century.

<sup>12</sup> Francesco Guidi, *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale considerato sotto il punto di vista fisiologico e psicologico* (Milan: Turati, 1854), pp. 191-205; Francesco Guidi, *I misteri del moderno spiritismo e l'antidoto contro le superstizioni del secolo XIX* (Milan: Bettoni, 1867), p. 10.

Although these positions remained peripheral, it is true that occultism and religion were far more coterminous than is generally acknowledged today. This cultural milieu is reflected in many mid and late nineteenth-century crime stories in which re-emerging forms of supernatural detection, influenced by the revival of spiritualism and the possibility of communicating with the dead, intertwine with the religious principle of divine justice. Francesco Mastriani playfully revisits in providential terms the motif of the return of the victim from the netherworld to denounce his own murder in *Il mio cadavere* (1852).<sup>13</sup> The wealthy German baron Edmondo Brighton stipulates a clause with Daniele, a young, ambitious pianist who turns out to be his legal son. According to the clause, in the case of Edmondo's death, Daniele has to keep vigil over his father's corpse for nine months until certain death is finally guaranteed. Daniele, who has managed to ensure a sizable inheritance, murders his father by poisoning him with an unknown venomous plant, but the baron's faithful servant Maurizio Berkeley begins to suspect him, and decides to lay a trap to induce the murderer to betray himself. Maurizio thus makes the corpse of Edmondo suddenly move and, thanks to his ability as ventriloquist, asks Daniele where he was hiding the poison. Overwhelmed by nine months of hallucinations and visions of his own father carrying out his revenge, Daniele falls immediately to the ground and is never able to recover fully.

While Marchesa Colombi (the pseudonym of Maria Antonietta Torriani) similarly plays with the motif of the retributive ghost in her 'I morti parlano' (1879) – in which the voice of a murdered man that drives his killer to confess turns out to come from a phonograph – Amilcare Lauria firmly sets revenge within the frame of supernatural

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<sup>13</sup> Francesco Mastriani, *Il mio cadavere*, 2 vols (Naples: Omnibus, 1852). The extraordinary similarities between this novel and Poe's short story 'Thou Art the Man' (1844) confirm, I believe, the influence of the American writer in Italy well before his appearance in translation.

justice. In 'Notizie dall'altro mondo' (1887), the ghost of a young man appears during a séance to accuse his mother's new husband of having killed him and disguised his death as suicide.<sup>14</sup> God is endowed here with the twin functions of detection and punishment. The motif of providential detection is subtly and indirectly reinstated by the protagonist, an old female medium shrouded in mystery, who repeatedly defends her spiritualist powers from the accusations of black magic, stressing that spiritualism is perfectly in accordance with Catholic doctrine: 'non sono cose contro la religione quelle che io faccio [...] le famiglie dalle quali vado, sono tutte gente Cristiana e timorata di Dio'.<sup>15</sup>

Mesmeric powers are equally employed as instruments of detection in the service of a higher form of justice, as is shown by Franco Mistrali's 'Caino' (1861), which associates detection with the biblical belief in the premonitory value of dreams as divine messages.<sup>16</sup> In this short story, an old physician narrates the adventure of two young officials of the French navy, Arturo and Guglielmo, who leave for a long expedition to India with very different feelings. While the former has nothing that keeps him tied to Paris, Guglielmo has only in mind his old father and his girlfriend Berta, both of whom

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<sup>14</sup> Maria Antonietta Torriani (1840-1920) was a journalist and writer who published much of her work under the pen name of Marchesa Colombi. She was especially active in the journalistic and literary scenes of Milan in the 1870s, writing realistic fiction. Her most famous novel is *Un matrimonio in provincia* (Milan: Galli, 1885). 'I morti parlano' was originally published in Marchesa Colombi, *La cartella n. 4* (Cesena: Libreria Editrice G. Gargano, 1880), pp. 99-197. In this short story, she draws on the technique of the explained supernatural, in which every seemingly supernatural intrusion is eventually traced back to natural causes, which was originally developed by the late eighteenth-century Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe and repeatedly used by following writers of crime and detective fiction. Amilcare Lauria (1854-1932) was a novelist particularly interested in depicting the customs of Neapolitan life. Much of his work belongs to the movement of *verismo*. His most famous novels are *Vecchia Napoli* (Rome: Voghera, 1895) and *Povero don Camillo* (Catania: Giannotta, 1897).

<sup>15</sup> Amilcare Lauria, 'Notizie dall'altro mondo' [1887], in *Da uno spiraglio. Racconti neri fantastici dell'Ottocento*, ed. by Riccardo Reim (Rome: Newton, 1992), pp. 369-74 (p. 371).

<sup>16</sup> Franco Mistrali, 'Caino' [1861], in *Ottocento nero italiano*, pp. 60-79. Franco Mistrali (1833-1880) was journalist, novelist, and historian. Former member of the Austrian navy, he became a fervent advocate of the revolution. Mistrali wrote mostly historical studies and novels. He is also remembered for *Il vampiro. Storia vera* (Bologna: società tipografica dei compositori, 1869), the first Italian variation on the theme of vampirism.

are waiting for him to come back home. Arturo is progressively devoured by his jealousy for his friend and one day he kills Guglielmo in a burst of murderous anger. As soon as he returns to France, Arturo marries Berta and they leave Paris. After ten years, Guglielmo's father is finally able to reach Arturo and accuses him of having murdered his son. During the quarrel, the old man abruptly dies of a heart attack, but Arturo remains paralysed by remorse and goes insane, not before having confessed his misdeed to the physician. When the story terminates and the doctor is asked to explain how the old man learned that his son was murdered, he surprises his sceptical audience affirming that '*la visione del padre di Guglielmo ha tutti i caratteri di un fenomeno magnetico che ho molte volte sperimentato*'.<sup>17</sup> Through the utilisation of the verb '*sperimentare*', the physician validates scientifically this apparently occult phenomenon, depriving it of its mysterious and incomprehensible nature. At the same time, though, mesmerism is subsumed into a markedly providential framework. Not only did the man dream and visualise the murder of his son, but he was also able to see abnormality and deviancy as inscribed in the flesh of Arturo, that God that had left as a mark on his body: he repeatedly says, '*guardati o maledetto! Dio non ha stampata sulla tua fronte l'arma incancellabile del tuo delitto?*'.<sup>18</sup> Mesmerism is thus ultimately endowed with the power of supernatural infallibility, providing the narrative with a providential reassertion of justice.

Ultimately, these stories highlight the existence of a superior justice that works in synergy with human agents, who, as can be noted, operate unconsciously, and are transformed into tools through which divine law can deliver its promise of omnipotence. It is still a world ruled by providence, which does not allow murders to go unpunished. Although, as we saw in the previous chapter, the paradigm of providential detection does

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<sup>17</sup> Mistrali, '*Caino*', p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

not disappear in *fin-de-siècle* crime fiction, it nonetheless gradually loses its association with the supernatural.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the increasing proliferation of scientific incursions into the terrain of the occult profoundly modified the relationship between human agency, supernaturalism, and the divine. Positivists, who believed that the existence of mesmeric abilities, poltergeists, and ghosts was by no means in conflict with their materialist and evolutionist orientation, saw the ultimate understanding of the biology of occultism as the final stage of scientific development. Science aimed to provide society with the means to confront what had previously been deemed as unattainable, taking over from religion as the primary source of truth. The outcome was, though, highly problematic.

Confident materialists repeatedly claimed that they had a single, naturalistic explanation for occult occurrences such as mesmerism, hypnotic sleep, and table-rapping at séances, although they produced no clear theory. Moreover, controversies over the very nature and functioning of occult phenomena destabilised the solidity of the scientific community. Suffice it to say that the positions in regard to spiritualism and hypnotism of two of the most important scholars of the period, Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Morselli, professor of psychiatry at the University of Turin, completely diverged.<sup>20</sup> Apart from the concern about the powers of Italy's most famous medium Eusapia Paladino – Lombroso believed in her spiritualist abilities, whereas Morselli was more sceptical – the most relevant conflict between them regarded the psychic powers of so-called magnetisers. In the late 1880s, scientific studies focusing on the relationship between the hypnotist and

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<sup>19</sup> There are of course exceptions, such as Daniele Oberto Marrama's 'Il ritratto del morto', a supernatural tale in which the spirit of a man who died in a railway accident intervenes to save the life of the journalist who had taken a photo of his corpse immediately after the disaster. Daniele Oberto Marrama, 'Il ritratto del morto', *La domenica del Corriere*, 20 (1903), 10-1.

<sup>20</sup> Enrico Morselli (1852-1929) was one of the key figures in the Italian medical scene between the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. He was professor of psychiatry at the University of Turin, as well as an important eugenicist. He was also particularly interested in mediumship and psychical research.

the hypnotised, and the consequences that this had on human will proliferated.<sup>21</sup> It is around the controversial figure of Donato, the theatrical magnetiser of crowds, who had revolutionised hypnosis through his discovery of a phenomenon called ‘fascination’, that the conflict between Italian scientists revolved. After his shocking performance in Turin in 1886, many criminologists, politicians, and clergymen immediately foresaw the danger that magnetisers might cause by directing people’s will, and reacted with horror and alarm. While Morselli drew a positive portrait of Donato in his study *Il magnetismo animale: la fascinazione e gli stati ipnotici* (1886) and dissented from the view that animal magnetism was necessarily evil, Lombroso and Angelo Mosso agreed that a solution was needed urgently, which eventually resulted in the official prohibition of public performances of hypnotism.<sup>22</sup>

In any case, Morselli and Lombroso agreed on the fact that hypnotism involves the deactivation of the inhibitory function of the subject’s brain and the consequent loss of free will: although, as Lombroso points out, ‘gli ipnotizzati possono ribellarsi ad una suggestione che sia in perfetto antagonismo col proprio carattere’, the subject’s free will is ‘nella maggior parte abolita e sostituita spesso da quella dell’ipnotizzatore’.<sup>23</sup> This debate had an enormous effect on the popular imaginary, raising the issue of whether and to what extent a person could be hypnotised into committing criminal acts, creating

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<sup>21</sup> Giulio Campili, *Il grande ipnotismo e la suggestione ipnotica nei rapporti col diritto penale e civile* (Turin: Bocca, 1886); Cesare Lombroso, *Studi sull’ipnotismo* (Turin: Bocca, 1886); Scipio Sighele, *La coppia criminale: studio di psicologia morbosa* (Turin: Bocca, 1893); Giulio Belfiore, *Magnetismo e ipnotismo* (Milan: Hoepli, 1898); Salvatore Ottolenghi, *La suggestione e le facoltà psichiche occulte in rapporto alla pratica legale e medico-forense* (Turin: Bocca, 1900).

<sup>22</sup> Cesare Lombroso, ‘Sulle proibizioni degli spettacoli ipnotici’, *Archivio di psichiatria*, 7 (1886), 504-5; Angelo Mosso, ‘Fisiologia e patologia dell’ipnotismo’, *Nuova antologia*, 21 (1886), 56-74.

<sup>23</sup> Lombroso, *Ricerche sui fenomeni ipnotici e spiritici*, p. 27. See also the definition of automatism, which indicates the elimination of will, in Enrico Morselli, *Il magnetismo animale: la fascinazione e gli stati ipnotici* (Turin: Roux & Favale, 1886), p. 92.

further problems for the law.<sup>24</sup> The effect of the Donato affair was to erode the confidence of scientists and to create an atmosphere of uncertainty and doubt. Lombroso unhappily acknowledges that ‘tutti o quasi i fenomeni offertimi dagli ipnotizzati mi parvero escire dalle norme della fisiologia e della patologia, per entrare in quelli dell’ignoto’, and concludes rather sharply that ‘la verità è che una spiegazione scientifica assolutamente non può darsi di questi fatti, i quali entrano nel vestibolo di quel mondo che deve giustamente chiamarsi ancora occulto, perché inesplicato’.<sup>25</sup> This climate opened up liminal and uncharted spaces, offering fictional opportunities that writers eagerly embraced.

On the one hand, the discovery of the ambiguous power of hypnotism, which promised the complete control of one mind over another and its possible criminalisation, increased the perception of magnetism and mesmerism as dangerously powerful criminal tools. When the specific sources of bad influence can no longer be clearly isolated and exorcised, powerfully suggestive characters begin to appear at an increased rate in European literature, from Svengali in George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894) to Dracula in Bram Stoker’s famous novel of the same name, originally published in 1897. Most Italian crime stories explore the terrible consequences of such a dark power in the hands of powerfully mesmeric characters, such as the villains in Gastone Rossi’s ‘Morte’ (1906) and Serao’s *La mano tagliata*, which probe into the dreams and fears of sexual dominance that fascination and influence inevitably imply.<sup>26</sup> In texts such as Capuana’s ‘Ofelia’ (1893), where a painter who has personally attended Donato’s performances hypnotises his unfaithful wife and forces her to commit suicide, hypnotism is still treated as a

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<sup>24</sup> Campili extensively discusses the potential culpability of a hypnotised subject, according to the principles of both the classical and the positivist schools of criminology. Campili, *Il grande ipnotismo e la suggestione ipnotica nei rapporti col diritto penale e civile*, pp. 55-77, 77-117.

<sup>25</sup> Lombroso, *Ricerche sui fenomeni ipnotici e spiritici*, pp. 27, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Gastone Rossi, ‘Morte’, *L’oceano*, 1.24 (1906), 279-81.



scientifically explicable process that is nonetheless uncanny in its workings and effects. In others, such as Carlo Dadone's 'L'invincibile' (1902), in which a wicked spiritualist fails to possess a woman by gaining control of her husband's mind and kills her before vanishing into thin air, hypnotism is seen as a weird, inexplicable force that makes the plot veer towards the realm of the supernatural.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, the utilisation of hypnotism as a tool of detection and justice in early twentieth-century popular fiction was limited to professional detectives who possessed specialised knowledge and were committed to scientific theory. In 'La coppa del re', an anonymous tale set in an English country-house and published in *La domenica del Corriere* in 1903, a famous criminal attorney investigates the theft of a precious cup that was owned in the past by Charles I of England.<sup>28</sup> He soon realises that it was he himself who stole the cup in a somnambulist state and concealed it in a place that he is not able to remember. Precisely as in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), where the mysterious doctor Ezra Jennings conducts a controversial exploration of the unconscious mind in order to solve the mystery of the diamond's disappearance, in this short story the detective propounds an experiment of self-hypnosis that ultimately helps him to recover the stolen cup. Hypnosis helps to clarify a complicated case of amnesia in Egisto Roggero's 'Un caso difficile' (1900), and is a key detective tool in the short story 'Il questore' (1907), penned by the unknown Riffa, where a police commissioner solves the murder of a young man by hypnotising his mother who, as a result of a telepathic

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<sup>27</sup> Luigi Capuana, 'Ofelia' [1893] in *Da uno spiraglio. Racconti neri fantastici dell'Ottocento*, pp. 115-123; Carlo Dadone, 'L'invincibile', *La domenica del corriere* 33-4 (1902), 10-2, 10-1. Carlo Dadone (1864-1931) was a writer, journalist, and humorist. He is mainly remembered for humorous novels such as *Come presi moglie. Autobiografia di un ex ghiottone* (Turin: Streglio, 1902) and *La forbice di legno* (Turin: Streglio, 1904).

<sup>28</sup> V.L. 'La coppa del re', *La domenica del Corriere*, 32 (1903), 10-1.

connection with her son, dreamt the scene of the homicide.<sup>29</sup>

What is interesting here is that notwithstanding the counter-examples mentioned above, the supernatural component appears to be largely attributed to the realm of evil and devilry. While villains are frequently endowed with supernatural powers that escape human understanding, detectives can almost exclusively rely on the scientifically explicable dimension of the occult. Firstly, as we saw in the previous chapter, detectives rarely hold that kind of supremely analytical power that characterises the minds of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Secondly, unlike the so-called occult detectives populating late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British fiction such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's Dr Martin Hesselius, Algernon Blackwood's John Silence, and William Hope Hodgson's Thomas Carnacki, who adopt all knowledge and all possible methods of inquiry, occult and esoteric ones included, Italian sleuths and physicians operate mainly through rational means.<sup>30</sup> Yet by relying only on rationality they can seldom provide a definitive answer for occult occurrences. In a story that will be discussed later, Luigi Capuana's 'Un vampiro' (1904), which features a doctor in charge of defeating the supernatural forces epitomised by a vampire, after a series of unsuccessful attempts, it is only through the use of an old, popular method against vampirism – the unearthing and cremation of the corpse – that he is finally able to dispel the vampire's presence. As the physician finally observes, 'la scienza deve essere

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<sup>29</sup> Egisto Roggero, 'Un caso difficile', *La domenica del Corriere*, 50 (1900), 11-3; Riffa, 'Il questore', *La domenica del corriere*, 20 (1907), 14-5. Egisto Roggero (1867-1930) was a writer and essayist who collaborated with some of the most important literary journals of the time, including *Marzocco*, *Liguria*, and *Iride*. The collection of short stories *I racconti meravigliosi* (Milan: La Poligrafica, 1901) includes his incursions into the territory of the Gothic and the supernatural.

<sup>30</sup> For an overview of the occult detectives see Marilena Parlati, 'Ghostly Traces, Occult Clues: Tales of Detection in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction', *European Journal of English Studies*, 15.3 (2011), 211-20; Maurizio Ascari, 'Ghosts in the Looking-Glass of Our Minds: I detective dell'occulto', *Linguae & Rivista di Lingue e Culture Moderne*, 11.1-2 (2012), 49-60.

modesta, buona, pur di aumentare il suo patrimonio di fatti, di verità'.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the supernatural is essentially a source of terror and mystery, and, if it cannot be materially explained, it must be necessarily incorporated into the natural world. Science must embrace what lies beyond the domain of the visible if it hopes to have access to the real truth.<sup>32</sup>

## 5.2 Deconstructing the (Super)Natural

In the years leading up to and immediately following the liberation of Rome, which deprived the Church of its temporal power, the conflict between the new secular state and the Catholic Church was extremely harsh. On the one hand, the papacy, as John Pollard notes, 'was equipping itself with the instruments and agents to conduct its war against the "modern world" that it had denounced in the Syllabus of Errors'.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, positivism, as the official culture of the governing élite, was concentrating on promoting modern social values and fighting against superstition, which intellectuals and scientists saw as a serious obstacle in the process of state-building.<sup>34</sup> The secularisation of crime

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<sup>31</sup> Luigi Capuana, 'Un vampiro' [1904], in *Fantastico italiano: racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento e del primo Novecento italiano*, ed. by Costanza Melani (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009), pp. 290-308 (p. 303).

<sup>32</sup> In his essay 'Il "di là"', Capuana mentions the research of the positivist Adolphe D'Assier, whose *Essai sur l'humanité posthume et le spiritisme par un positiviste* (Paris: Auguste Giho, 1883), and in particular the chapter 'Le vampire posthume' (pp. 288-305), have certainly influenced him: 'Il D'Assier, un comtiano, ha parlato dei vampiri, suggestori di sangue umano, cioè di morti che tentano di rendere più durevole la loro postuma esistenza, sottraendo a creature viventi forze fisiche, sangue o fluidi, o elettricità umana, da rendere possibile una più lunga durata della loro individualità. Ma ha pure osservato che la credenza popolare, in questo caso, dà ragione alla scienza. Unico modo di impedire l'azione del vampiro vien reputato il disseppellimento del cadavere della persona sospettata tale, e la cremazione di esso'. Luigi Capuana, 'Il di là' [1901] in *Mondo occulto*, ed. by Simona Cigliana (Catania: Edizioni del prisma, 1995), pp. 225-31 (pp. 229-30).

<sup>33</sup> Pollard, *Catholicism in Modern Italy*, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Luigi Stefanoni, *Storia critica della superstizione* (Milan: Gaetano Brigola, 1869); Paolo Mantegazza, *Inchiesta sulle superstizioni in Italia* (Florence: Arte della stampa,

and punishment was an important aspect of this campaign. Accordingly, traditional beliefs such as the idea of God as a supernatural agent who periodically punishes humanity for its sins were rejected as regressive or irrational within these secular discourses. The liberal, anticlerical pamphlet *Dio ossia le superstizioni vecchie e la miscredenza nuova* that Giovanni Franceschi, Professor of Medicine at the University of Bologna, delivered on the 12 January 1868 at the *Teatro comunale* in Bologna, sparked an extremely heated debate within both the scientific and Catholic communities, and a variety of texts were written either in support of or against his progressive ideas.<sup>35</sup> In such a complicated socio-political milieu, characterised by general anticlerical sentiment, scientism reached its zenith. In literature this is mirrored in the emergence of what Benedetta Montagni calls the ‘scienziato puro, tecnico da laboratorio, acceso sostenitore del metodo sperimentale’.<sup>36</sup> It is the presence of a ‘schiera di dottori illuminati dall’ottimismo scientifico e quindi fiduciosi nella possibilità di spiegare razionalmente qualsiasi fenomeno o manifestazione’ that marks 1860s and 1870s Italian literature as distinctive.<sup>37</sup> In order to test the far-reaching power of science, physicians are often placed against exceptional, abnormal clinical cases that defy the laws of nature, as in Arrigo Boito’s ‘Il pugno chiuso’ (1870), or are portrayed as capable of overcoming the limits of the material world, as in Capuana’s ‘Il dottor Cymbalus’ (1867).<sup>38</sup>

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1887); Romualdo Ghirlanda, *Della superstizione e dei pregiudizi popolari* (Ferrara: Premiata tipografia sociale, 1882).

<sup>35</sup> An example is Giovanni Lodovico Sottari, *Dio ossia le superstizioni vecchie e la miscredenza nuova, discorso del Prof G. Franceschi esaminato dal parroco G.L. Sottari* (Bologna: Direzione delle piccole letture cattoliche, 1868).

<sup>36</sup> Benedetta Montagni, *Angelo consolatore e ammazzapazienti: la figura del medico nella letteratura italiana dell’Ottocento* (Florence: Le lettere, 1999), p. 203.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>38</sup> Arrigo Boito, ‘Il pugno chiuso’ [1870] (Palermo: Sellerio, 1981); Luigi Capuana, ‘Il dottor Cymbalus’ [1867], in *Storia fosca* (Rome: Sommaruga, 1883), pp. 145-85. Arrigo Boito (1842-1918) was a poet, journalist, writer, librettist, and composer. Along with Emilio Praga and others, he was one of the most prominent exponents of the *Scapigliatura* movement.

In crime fiction, this attitude is reflected in the exploitation of the supernatural as a transitory explanation, a plot device that enhances suspense and an atmosphere of terror that must be ultimately dispelled in order to reinforce the power of science. A paradigmatic example is Luisa Emanuel Saredo's 'La locanda dell'orso', written under the pseudonym of Ludovico de Rosa and serialised in the journal *La rivista europea* between December 1869 and December 1870.<sup>39</sup> Maurizio, a young physician 'positivo per natura', precisely like the characters of classical ghost-stories such as Walter Scott's 'The Tapestryed Chamber' (1829) and Wilkie Collins's 'A Terribly Strange Bed' (1852), is forced to spend the night in a country inn due to a snowstorm.<sup>40</sup> The place is fully booked, except for a small, separate lodge that the proprietor, a woman who firmly believes that the place is haunted, refuses to rent out. Maurizio eventually overcomes her resistance, but, over the course of the night, a series of sinister sounds and the sudden apparition of a 'testa di un essere strano, mostro o fantasma, il quale mi fissava con occhi tremolanti' contribute to undermining his apparently unshakable faith in material facts: 'ho veduto e inteso infatti cose singolari: ho assistito questa notte a scene strane incredibili, e ora riflettendovi a mente fredda, mi persuado che il chalet dev'essere abitato'.<sup>41</sup> However, Maurizio does not surrender and, after tearing down the lodge he discovers that the haunting presences were actually the children of the proprietor's dead husband, kept imprisoned by the woman who wanted to prevent them from claiming the inheritance. In this story, the dispelling of the supernatural manifestation into a human, a plot device that typified Ann Radcliffe's late eighteenth-century Gothic novels, serves to

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<sup>39</sup> Luisa Emanuel Saredo, 'La locanda dell'orso' [1869-70], in *Fantastico italiano*, pp. 450-79. Luisa Saredo, who was born as Luigia Emanuel (1830-1896) was a writer, poet, and journalist particularly active in the Piedmontese literary scene in the 1850s and subsequently in Rome in the 1870s. Her novel *Chi rompe paga* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1873) constitutes an embryonic example of detective story.

<sup>40</sup> Saredo, 'La locanda dell'orso', p. 450.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 461, 468.

underscore the pervasiveness of human evil. Real horror is inspired not by the supposedly occult events of the case but by the grisliness of the villain and the appalling depths of human hate and evil they imply. The overcoming of chaos and mystery, as exemplified by the supernatural tale, becomes a powerful and reassuring victory for the forces of logic and positivist rationality: ‘io pure, positivo e medico per giunta, credetti per un momento di vedere uno spettro. Devo soggiungere però che fu quella l’unica volta, in cui ebbi a che fare con fantasmi od apparizioni’.<sup>42</sup>

The literary landscape, however, was rapidly changing, and throughout the second half of the century the supernatural acquires a more and more intrusive and pervasive dimension. The increasing difficulty of science to provide conclusive, materialist explanations for occult occurrences contributed to a general dissatisfaction with a culture that was hastily and unconvincingly superimposing dogmatic certitudes. In line with such a widespread distrust surrounding positivist science, fictional physicians underwent a radical change throughout the second half of the century, developing into sceptical, often disillusioned figures, constantly forced to reassess their beliefs when a confrontation with the supernatural leaves them with more questions than answers.<sup>43</sup> In Daniele Oberto Marrama’s ‘Il medaglione’ (1903) and Italo Toscani’s ‘La mano di sangue’ (1906), for example, the protagonists advance material explanations, albeit unconvincingly, which respectively involve insanity and heredity for exceptional cases of metempsychosis. Moreover, in Salvatore di Giacomo’s ‘La fine di Barth’ (1893) and Luigi Albertini’s ‘L’enigma’ (1909) doctors are unable to provide any answers for crimes that seem to rule out human agency, ultimately remaining with the doubt that ghosts could actually kill.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>43</sup> Montagni, *Angelo consolatore e ammazzapazienti*, p. 283

<sup>44</sup> Daniele Oberto Marrama, ‘Il medaglione’, *La domenica del Corriere*, 33 (1903), 10-2; Italo Toscani, ‘La mano di sangue’, *La domenica del Corriere*, 25-6 (1906) 11-2, 11-2; Salvatore di Giacomo, ‘La fine di Barth’ [1893] in *Fantastico italiano*, pp. 380-4; Luigi Albertini, ‘L’enigma’,

It is precisely within a cultural climate that was casting doubt on exclusively scientific forms of investigation that we can read those texts that appropriate the structure and thematic features of the rational detective story only with the intent, or at least the effect, of subverting them, revealing the impotence of human reason, and paving the way for metaphysical interpretations of the universe.

An early case in point is Luigi Capuana's 'Un caso di sonnambulismo', written in 1873 but left unpublished until its appearance in the collection *Un bacio e altri racconti* in 1881.<sup>45</sup> It is the story of Dionigi Van-Spengel, a brilliant police detective and 'allievo prediletto del Vidocq' who one day awakens to find, in his own handwriting, a detailed, first-person account that describes an investigation on a multiple homicide committed in a locked apartment that is redolent of Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841).<sup>46</sup> In an unnerving series of events that shakes his conceptions of time, space, and the wholeness of the human psyche, the detective uncannily investigates the very case that his somnambulist double had related in his report. By following his unconscious other's description of the case, Van-Spengel solves the mystery but, finally, his rational mind cannot handle the incongruousness of such an inexplicable phenomenon and he succumbs to delirium. The text concludes with the puzzling question that the director of the Brussels asylum, Doctor Croissart, who was treating Van-Spengel's problems of insomnia, poses: 'quando vediamo il nostro organismo mostrar tanta potenza in casi tanto eccezionali ed

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*La domenica del Corriere*, 9 (1909), 10-2. Italo Toscani (1886-?) was a journalist, politician, poet, and writer, who wrote several Gothic and fantastic short stories in journals such as *La sfinge*, *La domenica del Corriere*, and *Il giornale dei viaggi*. Luigi Albertini (1871-1941) was one of the most influential newspaper editors of the time. He was the head editor of the *Corriere della sera* from 1900 to 1921. Salvatore di Giacomo (1860-1934) was a poet, writer, and intellectual. He is considered one of the most important personalities of Neapolitan culture at the turn of the century. His fantastic and supernatural stories were collected in the volume *Pipa e boccale. Racconti fantastici* (Naples: Bider, 1893).

<sup>45</sup> Luigi Capuana, 'Un caso di sonnambulismo' [1881] in Luigi Capuana, *Un bacio ed altri racconti* (Sesto S. Giovanni: Casa editrice Madella, 1917), pp. 83-123.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

evidentemente morbosì, chi ardirà d'asserire che le presenti facoltà siano il limite estremo imposto ad esso dalla natura?'.<sup>47</sup> Although the physician faintly suggests the existence of a medical explanation, he actually reinforces the sensation that the entire succession of events remains fundamentally inexplicable.

This highly fascinating short story, which has been interpreted over the years mainly in light of the analogy between the artist and the medium envisaged by Capuana, which is later reinforced by Lombroso, has much else to say, I argue, if we pay attention to the voices of the text itself.<sup>48</sup> As Freud famously argues in his essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919), the double represents the first agent of uncanniness, a particularly disturbing compound of the forces of familiarity and strangeness, self and other.<sup>49</sup> The sense of uncanniness produced by juxtaposition of the acknowledgement of the detective's own handwriting with the exclamation that he did not actually write the report – 'questa scrittura è la mia! [...] Eppure non l'ho fatta io, no davvero' – mirrors the uncanniness of Capuana's universe, in which the homely and the strange, the familiar (the so-called natural world) and the unfamiliar (the supernatural world) are conflated: the supernatural, as he puts it in a 1901 essay, is simply 'qualche cosa che sta oltre i limiti delle comuni nostre facoltà di vedere e di sentire, ma che esiste nella Natura precisamente come vi esistevano tante forze fisiche prima ignorate e delle quali ora ci serviamo'.<sup>50</sup> If Capuana's system of knowledge is open to embracing the realm of the invisible, blurring the boundaries between what we know and what we do not know, textual representations of such a fluid worldview are necessarily open to multiple interpretations. While the backward construction of the rational detective story inaugurated by Poe promotes the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>48</sup> Angelo M. Mangini, 'A Portrait of the Writer as a *Somnambule*: Reflections on *Verismo* and Phantasmagoria in Verga and Capuana', in *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic*, pp. 80-97.

<sup>49</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 234-8.

<sup>50</sup> Capuana, 'Un caso di sonnambulismo', p. 90; Capuana, 'Il di là', p. 225.



closed nature of the text and ideally allows complete authorial control, this story escapes such control precisely due to the way in which it is constructed, permitting infinite speculative possibilities.

Firstly, the reader is constantly disoriented by the excessively convoluted structure of the text, told from different perspectives and intertwining narrative viewpoints – the third-person narrator that introduces the story; Van-Spengel's servant, who testifies to have seen him writing during the night; the detective's detailed report of the murder; and the excerpts from the memoirs of doctor Croissart. Secondly, the reader is deceived by textual inconsistencies; for instance, one of the policemen who is investigating the crime scene, Lerouge, quite unexpectedly assumes the name of Maresque.<sup>51</sup> Such a multiplication of identities informs both the detective and the criminal. The threefold nature of the protagonist's personality – the conscious Van-Spengel who acts in Doctor Croissart's narrative; Van-Spengel's clairvoyant second self who composes the crime report; and the character Van-Spengel, protagonist of the crime report – mirrors the three identities of the culprit: 'caro dottor Bassottin, o meglio signor Colichart, o, se più vi aggrada, signor Anatolio Pardin, scegliete!', says the detective when he captures him.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the fact that the physician's report is called a 'memoir' betrays its lack of scientific objectivity and is further evidence of the untrustworthiness of Doctor Croissart. The narrator, in fact, discourages the reader from looking for a copy of the doctor's memoirs in the footnote he inserts, affirming that the book is already out of print and is impossible to find. Furthermore, he adds that if the readers attempt to compare Croissart's narration of streets and locations in Brussel where the events take place, they will discover

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<sup>51</sup> Capuana, 'Un caso di sonnambulismo', pp. 93, 95.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

that the street names had been changed after 1873.<sup>53</sup>

All things considered, it may be argued that the fragmented and obscure character of the text casts profound doubts on its reliability, thus offering fertile terrain for rereading. From the account of Van-Spengel's servant, for instance, we know that she checked on him twice during the night. Her ensuing affirmation that the detective 'ha scritto dall'una alle quattro' is thus completely misleading.<sup>54</sup> In fact, her whole account simply means that she saw him twice during the night, at one and four o'clock in the morning, respectively. Consequently, no one knows what really happened over the span of those three hours. But we do know that, according to the forensic analysis carried out at the crime scene, the murder was committed between two and three o'clock. It is then plausible to argue that, at one o'clock, the detective, in a somnambulist state, started planning and writing the account of his own crime. As a policeman, he had all the instruments as well as plenty of time to break into the apartment without leaving any trace, commit the robbery, kill four people and then frame the false culprit by hiding the stolen goods in his house. This would explain why, while conducting the search the following morning, Van-Spengel is so sure where to find them – 'picchiò in vari punti sul pavimento, indi smosse un mattone colla punta della sua mazza. Apparve una buca' – and why the criminal never really confesses.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the resoluteness and mental strength shown by the detective during the investigation works against the hypothesis according to which Van-Spengel loses his sanity after realising he is a clairvoyant, especially if we take into account the very short period of time that spans between the capture of the criminal and the manifestation of the detective's delirium. It is then possible to suggest

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<sup>53</sup> Capuana writes, 'I lettori non cerchino questo volume presso i librai; è completamente esaurito, e non ne troverebbero una sola copia nemmeno a pagarla a peso d'oro. Un curioso, confrontando la narrazione del dottor Croissart con una pianta della città di Brusselle, ha notato che i nomi delle vie devono essere stati cambiati dopo il 1873'. Ibid., pp. 83n-84n.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

that, immediately after having solved the mystery, the detective begins to suspect a more disturbing truth, namely that it was he himself who committed the crime. As soon as he glimpses such a terrifying possibility, he completely loses his sanity: ‘il signor Van-Spengel pareva in preda a un fierissimo accesso nervoso. Metteva paura. [...] Era ammattito!’.<sup>56</sup>

At the end of the story, the world no longer seems to make sense. While the conclusion of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ represents the triumph of ratiocination over the mayhem of improbability and uncertainty, here we have the victory of chaos. The detective pursues his prey only to discover that he has pursued himself, as in Poe’s ambiguous ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840). The closed case turns into an open text. The ultimate doubling of the detective and the criminal makes the text veer towards the territory of the metaphysical detective story, a form of crime writing that, according to Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, subverts traditional detective story conventions in order to raise profound questions ‘about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge’.<sup>57</sup> The text has finally metamorphosed into a labyrinth from which neither the detective nor the reader can ever escape. The former is left with more questions than answers, and finds himself ‘confronting with the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity’.<sup>58</sup> Van-Spengel is caught into an obsessive quest for self-knowledge that leaves him without the possibility of distinguishing truth from falsehood, reason from madness. The impossibility of answering the unfathomable epistemological and ontological questions he addresses – what do I know? Am I a murderer? – indicates that reality is

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>57</sup> Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, ‘The Game’s Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story’, in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, ed. by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 1-24 (p. 1).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

equivocal and ultimately indecipherable. Precisely as the reader is pushed towards madness due to the impossibility of reaching a definitive, satisfying solution, the self-defeating closure of the investigation leads to the detective's psychic death. As John Irwin puts it, 'if the hero fails to solve the riddle or unravel the labyrinth, then he dies'.<sup>59</sup> While on the surface this text seems to merely dismantle absolutist, positivistic interpretations of the natural universe by conflating somnambulism, spiritualism, and neurosis, considered in more depth it calls into question the very possibility of reliable knowledge, and challenges the capacity for literature to convey indisputable truths.

The trustworthiness of detectives as agents of order and justice, on one hand, and of rationality as the privileged form of enquiry, on the other, are further undermined and ultimately discredited in the *fin-de-siècle* narrative of Remigio Zena.<sup>60</sup> His late work consists of four short-stories written approximately between 1895 and 1912 – 'L'invitata', 'La pantera', 'Confessione postuma', and 'La cavalcata' – that explore the consequences of the subject's sudden encounter with the supernatural.<sup>61</sup> The author's tormented personality, troubled by a continual tension between a strongly Catholic education and a more open and independent view of life – proven by his early adherence to the poetics of the *scapigliatura* and his ensuing interest in the supernatural and the occult – is translated into a hallucinatory, contradictory, and impenetrable literary universe dominated by the preternatural forces of God and Satan, which repeatedly transgress the laws of nature through means that 'la nostra vana scienza e il nostro

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<sup>59</sup> John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective story* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 221.

<sup>60</sup> Remigio Zena (1850-1917) is the pseudonym of the Genoan novelist, poet, and magistrate Gaspare Ivrea. He had contact with the *scapigliatura*, and his most famous work is the realist novel *La bocca del lupo* (Milan: Treves, 1892), set in Genoa's poverty-stricken back streets.

<sup>61</sup> Except for 'Confessione postuma', which appeared in 1897, the other three short-stories remained unpublished. 'La pantera' was most likely written in 1895, according to the date found at the end of the manuscript. See Alessandra Briganti, 'Nota introduttiva', in Remigio Zena, *Confessione postuma. Quattro storie dell'altro mondo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), pp. V-XII.

orgoglio e la nostra miseria non possono comprendere né spiegare’, as a priest acknowledges in ‘Confessione postuma’.<sup>62</sup> Unlike Capuana, then, Zena considers science as unable to grasp and explain what is beyond the realm of representation. The eminent spiritualist Zamit in ‘L’invitata’ asserts that confident materialists ‘invocano in un avvenire più o meno remoto la lanterna della scienza’ when they face apparently illogical and irrational occurrences, but then warns that ‘ho paura che la scienza puramente umana non avrà mai olio per cotesta lanterna’.<sup>63</sup> The author’s troubled Catholic faith permeates these late works, in which the hand of providence is profoundly obfuscated by the terrifying, devilish manifestations of Satan. Violence and horror contaminate a world in which even those who are supposed to provide reassurance and order, such as the cowardly police detective protagonist of ‘La cavalcata’, turn into vehicles of chaos and injustice.

One of the most significant yet largely under-studied short-stories of Zena is ‘La pantera’.<sup>64</sup> In this text, the increasingly recognisable features of the detective genre are directly parodied and exploited in order to ridicule human reason and its application in police investigations. When the corpse of a Russian anarchist, Vasili Tchernyschewski, and his dog are discovered in a hermetically sealed apartment, both policemen and forensic criminologists cannot but apply logic and point the finger at the animal as responsible for the crime. Blindly driven by their faith in reasoning – ‘la scienza parla chiaro, non si sbaglia la scienza’, they constantly repeat – they dismiss as ‘sottigliezze [...] oziose’ the incontrovertible yet inexplicable fact that the traces left on the corpse clearly belong to a ferocious feline rather than a canine.<sup>65</sup> Logic, then, is totally misleading. While in Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ Dupin identifies the culprit

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<sup>62</sup> Remigio Zena, ‘Confessione postuma’, in Id., *Confessione postuma*, pp. 3-17 (p. 3).

<sup>63</sup> Remigio Zena, ‘L’invitata’, in Id., *Confessione postuma*, pp. 73-91 (pp. 80-1).

<sup>64</sup> Remigio Zena, ‘La pantera’, in Id., *Confessione postuma*, pp. 95-114.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 104, 106.

from the print left on the neck of one of the murdered women, a clue disregarded as such by official police investigators, who assume it to be the print of a human hand, ‘La pantera’ ends without a clear resolution.

As soon as readers find themselves at an impasse, the narrator presents an excerpt from a newspaper that relates the bizarre story of a man who happened to save the life of a woman, a tamer, nearly killed by a tiger in a circus in Odessa. His name, he adds, is Vasili Tchernyschewski. Although trapped inside the cage, surprisingly the man was able to escape by vanishing into thin air:

fu lì che la belva riuscì a spezzare l’incantesimo e si avventò al collo del domatore, ma troppo tardi; per un prodigio della sorte, egli aveva fatto in tempo a sparire dietro l’uscio, e se ci sembrò un istante vederlo lottare nell’orribile abbraccio, senza dubbio non fu che una allucinazione momentanea dei nostri sensi ubbriachi di terrore e d’ansietà.<sup>66</sup>

The journal article hints at the supernatural at work, yet the lexicon of the journalist explicitly suggests the unreliability of the whole reconstruction, stressing the fact that the audience have without doubt suffered from a collective hallucination.

When the story abruptly ends and readers have to piece together an interpretation of the events, they are completely clueless. Precisely as in Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, where the testimonies do not agree on the traits and geographical provenance of the voice they heard from inside the apartment, which is described variously in the text as ‘very strange’, ‘shrill’ and ‘harsh’, in ‘La pantera’ the divergent and contradictory

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

witnesses' reports offer numerous interpretations:<sup>67</sup>

alcuni pretendevano d'essere stati svegliati da un colpo di pistola fortissimo, che rintronò cupo nel silenzio della notte non preceduto né seguito da strepiti di sorta altri invece giuravano sull'anima loro di aver udito tra il sonno e la veglia il rumore sordo come d'una lotta corpo a corpo, e coll'abbaiare di un cane furibondo, delle grida imploranti d'aiuto, poi giù per le scale il frettoloso calpestio di gente che fuggiva a precipizio. [...] Senonché la Bernabei e sua figlia, quelle che erano state le prime a gettar l'allarme [...] non sapevano affatto né di colpi di pistola né d'altri strepiti e tanto meno di ladri o d'assassini fuggitivi'.<sup>68</sup>

Yet, while in Poe the sounds grasped at the crime scene represent an equivocal clue as well as a crucial element through which the author perpetuates the illusion that the murderer could have been a man, thereby concealing the fact that the voice actually comes from an orang-utan, in Zena these testimonies are useless and essentially irrelevant. In fact, all other elements scattered in the text turn out to be unproductive too. While in 'Un caso di sonnambulismo' the process of detection is destabilised by the multiplication of possible solutions, here it is frustrated and ultimately reduced to absurdity not because the supernatural has effectively turned out to be real, but because the act of reading and the attempt at detecting the text do not lead anywhere. The text provides both a rational and an irrational explanation, yet they lead readers into a blind alley. The police investigation cannot rationally overcome the inherent impossibility of a murder

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<sup>67</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' [1841], in *The Penguin Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 141-68 (pp. 149-50).

<sup>68</sup> Zena, 'La pantera', in Id., *Confessione postuma*, p. 96.

perpetrated in a locked room, whereas the supernatural explanation is eventually discredited by the journalist himself. Neither the author nor the police can assert their authority over the text as agents of resolution, rendering the deviant plot uncontrollable for the reader. It is not coincidental that this short story remained unpublished. It is even possible to hypothesise that the author deliberately left it unfinished. Ironically, this may be the only real clue. The text, precisely like our world, is fundamentally unknowable precisely because it does not allow itself to be read. Simply, humans do not have the instruments, or clues, to understand neither what our eyes see nor what they do not.

Rational and supernatural, ultimately, are teeming sites of cultural confrontation whose borders are all but safe and orderly. All the texts that I have discussed here reveal that the two discursive realms of science and occultism cannot be entirely separated nor fully integrated. This failed attempt mirrors, as we shall see now, the unaccomplished project of modernising, normalising, and bringing stability to the new body politic. The long-coveted transition from darkness to light, from the obscurity of a supernatural/divine dimension to the clarity of positivist knowledge, as this chapter shows, was never fully attained.

### 5.3 Vampirism, Sexuality, and the Body Politic

The *fin-de-siècle*, marked by an increasing number of both amateur and professional incursions into the occult, saw the re-emergence of a powerfully Gothic figure that had appeared only sporadically in the Italian literary sphere throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> The literary vampire rises again in an assortment of short stories that include Francesco Morando's 'Vampiro innocente' (1885), Giuseppe Tonsi's 'Il vampiro'

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<sup>69</sup> See Giuseppe Tardiola, *Il vampiro nella letteratura italiana*, (Anzio: De Rubeis, 1991), p. 33.



(1902), Daniele Oberto Marrama's 'Il dottor Nero' (1904), and Luigi Capuana's 'Un vampiro' (1904). As suggested before, the very limited circulation of classic British Gothic texts in nineteenth-century Italy, as Camilletti also notes, is one of the reasons why Italian writers developed vampirism differently and autonomously.<sup>70</sup> These texts are, in fact, an echo more of European folklore than of the literary vampires created by Anglophone writers. Common motifs amongst folkloric vampires that are central in these literary texts include the appearance of vampire fantasies in circumstances of acute object loss and intense grief on the part of the survivors; the marginalisation of blood, with vampires that are mainly recognised due to their consumption of the victim's life force; and the idea that the recurring visitations to family members by the recent deceased vampire brings malevolence, bad luck, or death.<sup>71</sup>

The vampire, a figure that transgresses the categories that make the world intelligible, escaping attempts at identification and engendering unease and panic in those who confront it, has during the nineteenth century mutated and adapted to the Italian environment to challenge not simply its rationality, but also accepted assumptions about family, gender, and sexuality. In this section, I will be referring to Marrama's 'Il dottor Nero', and more in depth to Capuana's 'Un vampiro', two short stories that display similar patterns, both depicting the vampire as a dead man that comes back from the grave and attacks his widow as a consequence of her recent new marriage.<sup>72</sup> In 'Il dottor nero', an ambiguous Spanish doctor 'dalla barba nerissima, dagli occhi penetranti' keeps a

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<sup>70</sup> Camilletti, *Italia lunare*, p. 51.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Gottlieb, 'The European Vampire: Applied Psychoanalysis and Applied Legend', *Folklore Forum*, 24.2 (1991), 39-58 (p. 42); *The Vampire in Folklore. History, Literature, Film and Television: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, ed. by Gordon Melton and Alys Hornick (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), p. 39; Matthew Beresford, *From Demons to Dracula: The Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth* (London: Reaktion, 2008), p. 100.

<sup>72</sup> Daniele Oberto Marrama, 'Il dottor Nero', in *La domenica del Corriere*, 33 (1904), 10-2. The same storyline typifies Virginio Appiani's 'Il segreto della morta', *La domenica del Corriere*, 42 (1901), 10-2, where a recently dead man returns in the form of a ghost to kill his adulteress wife.

beautiful, suggestible, young woman tied to him through a sort of diabolical ‘influsso magnetico’.<sup>73</sup> When he leaves for a long expedition to South America, he then warns her that ‘uomini come me non si debbono dimenticare’ because ‘essi si vendicano del tradimento come dell’abbandono, *con armi che nessun uomo al mondo conosce!*’.<sup>74</sup> After a while, the man is found dead, killed, according to local sources, by a mysterious vampire bat. The woman, suddenly relieved and free, embarks on a new relationship, but the promised revenge of the doctor, who has now taken the form of a vampire bat, is inescapable.

In ‘Un vampiro’, the unfortunate Lelio Giorgi asks his physician friend Mongeri for help as his recently married wife, Luisa, seems to have been possessed by the spirit-vampire of her dead former husband. He torments the living couple with his violent jealousy at her perceived betrayal, and attempts to kill their child by sucking the life out of him. The story in some ways constitutes a parody of the motif of the man coming back from the dead to denounce his own murder. The spirit openly accuses his former wife of having disposed of him, but the physician, in this case, refutes to take such possibility into consideration. He rules out the culpability of the woman, and his intervention eventually saves the lives of the couple and their new-born son. While ‘Il dottor Nero’ has been neglected by scholars, Capuana’s ‘Un vampiro’ has received more attention in critical literature. Scholars, though, have limited to consider superficially the relationship between science and the occult. Giuseppe Tardiola argues that ‘si tratta di una novella di forte impronta positivista e che pertanto riconduce il tema fantastico all’interno di un dibattito critico fra scienza e irrazionalità’, while for Annamaria Loria the pivotal theme of the story is ‘la polemica nei confronti della scienza ufficiale’.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Marrama, ‘Il dottor Nero’, p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 11. Emphasis in the text.

<sup>75</sup> Tardiola, *Il vampiro nella letteratura italiana*, p. 37; Annamaria Loria, ‘Un vampiro: fra racconto fantastico e racconto spiritico’, in *La tentazione del fantastico*, pp. 395-412 (p. 404).

In these texts, I argue, the invariably male vampire represents an extraordinarily potent catalyst that attracts and refracts some of the most pressing fears and anxieties of *fin-de-siècle* Italian society. In fact, vampirism constitutes a disruptive factor through which male writers seek to conceal, contain, and exorcise precise objects of anxiety concerned with the emergence of feminism and the so-called New Woman. In her demand for economic, political, and notably sexual independence, the late-nineteenth century woman destabilised the very concept of femininity and exposed her culturally constructed role in both domestic and social spheres. Positivism, as the expression of the nation's ruling classes, was committed to constructing and organising Italian society. A crucial part of this mission was to control sexuality and maintain gender hierarchies, which represented fundamental elements for providing stability in social organisation. The interest of criminologists in studying female offenders — a population seldom mentioned in the history of criminology — can only be understood as a response to the immediacy of the woman question in Italy of the 1890s and the fears aroused by their demands for sexual independence.<sup>76</sup>

On the one hand, aggressive sexuality, considered an inherently male or virile characteristic, brought into question the scientific assumption that normal women are feminine, necessarily monogamous, and sexually passive. For the positivists, sexual instinct is less intense in women than men, and tends to atrophy over time.<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, Lombroso considers prostitution, a term that at times refers to all women who experience sex outside of marriage, the specifically female form of criminality.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>76</sup> Giuseppe Ardini, *La donna delinquente e la legge penale: considerazioni medico-legali* (Catania: Galatola, 1883); Vito Antonio Berardi, *Sulla donna delinquente* (Naples: Anfossi, 1887); Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (Turin: Roux & C., 1893); Paolo Mantegazza, *Fisiologia della donna* (Milan: Treves, 1893); Giuseppe Sergi, 'La donna normale e la degenerata', *Nuova antologia*, 130 (1893), 152-62.

<sup>77</sup> Lombroso, *La donna delinquente*, p. 44.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 571.

strong female sexuality challenges the position of the church, which sees the woman as exclusively dedicated to motherhood and reproduction.

It comes as no surprise that these stories of violence in and towards the family were published at a time when the institution of marriage was receiving considerable public attention. The question of marriage dominated the political scene between 1878 and 1902, when eight attempts to introduce divorce into Italian legislation were invariably frustrated by the intervention of the Church, which aimed to protect the sanctity of marriage from the depredations of advancing liberalism and feminism.<sup>79</sup> For the Catholic hierarchy, the idea of a woman wanting to take such an initiative was great offence to the divine order of things but also to the patriarchal structure of society. The article ‘La donna degradata’ published in the Catholic journal *L’osservatore romano* underlined how Christian marriage protected women precisely from becoming vile instruments of animal passion.<sup>80</sup>

As Mark Seymour observes, many late nineteenth-century Italian men felt intimidated by the emergence of feminism, and the determination to reject divorce was linked to the attempt to protect masculinity itself, along with its attendant privileges.<sup>81</sup> By showing female sexual impulses leading women into committing adultery or remarrying, the women protagonists of these texts, however subtly, represent a powerful menace to male power and the very concept of masculinity. Female sexuality takes on dangerous connotations in many of Capuana’s works, from *Giacinta* (1879), in which adultery leads to degradation, decay, and suicide, to *Profumo* (1892), where only the aid of a doctor permits the male protagonist to prevent his wife from committing adultery, helping him to find a way to fulfil his marital obligations, and to deal with, control, and contain the woman’s sexuality within the accepted boundaries.

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<sup>79</sup> Mark Seymour, ‘Keystone of the Patriarchal family? Indissoluble Marriage, Masculinity and Divorce in Liberal Italy’, *Italian Studies*, 10.3 (2005), 297-313 (p. 302).

<sup>80</sup> ‘La donna degradata’, *Osservatore romano*, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1879, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Seymour, ‘Keystone of the Patriarchal Family?’, p. 300.

In 'Un vampiro', the physician constantly repeats that one should never marry a widow because 'qualcosa permane sempre del marito morto, a dispetto di tutto, nella vedova'.<sup>82</sup> This comment suggests that a widow, as a woman who has formerly been in a sexual relationship with another man, is fundamentally tarnished, because she threatens any man's control and is in a position to compare one man's sexual prowess with another's. This impression is reinforced by the protagonist's description of his own feelings of jealousy towards his wife and her former spouse: 'certe volte, il pensiero che il corpo della mia adorata era stato in pieno possesso, quantunque legittimo, di un altro mi dava tale stretta al cuore, che mi faceva fremere da capo a piedi'.<sup>83</sup> When the apparitions of the spirit-vampire begin, the monster penetrates the woman's body, transforming it into a repulsive, corrupt, and unwanted sexual presence: 'la signora Luisa si era rizzata sul busto con tal viso rabbuiato, con tale espressione di durezza nei lineamenti, da sembrare un'altra persona'.<sup>84</sup>

Such a concern for the female body and the menace it presupposes conceals also a strong preoccupation about male vulnerability, which permeates post-unification Italian society at different levels. By drawing on Angus McLaren's study on impotence, which has shown how male sexual potency has long been intertwined with ideas about the vigour of the body politic, historians such as Silvana Patriarca and Mark Seymour have argued that preoccupation about the nature of masculinity and its increasing vulnerability in Italy at both official and popular levels were intimately bound up with anxieties about the strength and legitimacy of the new state.<sup>85</sup> More specifically, Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg

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<sup>82</sup> Capuana, 'Un vampiro', p. 297.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>85</sup> Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. XII; Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 15; Mark Seymour, 'Contesting Masculinity in Post-Unification Italy: The Murder of Captain Giovanni Fadda', *Gender &*

observes that the project of making Italians relied on, but also produced, discourses of gender and sexuality whereby the problem of making an Italian subject ‘came to be lived as a crisis of the paternal function and hence as a crisis of male performativity’.<sup>86</sup> It is not a coincidence that, in ‘Un vampiro’, the ghostly manifestations begin when the woman finds out she is pregnant: as soon as she confesses to her husband ‘come sono felice [...] che questo sia avvenuto soltanto ora’, they both distinctly hear ‘un gran colpo all’uscio’.<sup>87</sup> Shortly after, we are told that ‘tutto l’odio di *colui* era rivolto contro il bambino’.<sup>88</sup> The furious reaction of the vampire against the infant, who is almost completely deprived of his life force, can be read precisely as a refusal to accept the idea that he himself was unable to fulfil his marital obligations and provide his wife and family with a child.

A preoccupation with virility is equally present in ‘Il dottor Nero’. It is not coincidental, I argue, that in this short story, written by a Neapolitan writer like Marrama, the vampire is portrayed as a foreign, specifically Spanish, entity. Spain was for centuries a colonial power over Southern Italy, particularly the Neapolitan regions. The unificatory process was supposed to bring an end to such oppression, yet it perhaps even aggravated it. The imperial, oppressive powers of the North replaced Spain as the intruding force coming from abroad, exercising hegemony, and contaminating the Southern regions and their inhabitants. For Marrama, Spain is the metaphoric substitute for the hegemonic North and the threat from within that it poses to Southern identity, which is increasingly under attack and forced to conform to foreign powers and ideologies.

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*History*, 25.2 (2013), 252-69 (p. 254). Since the Risorgimento at least, debating national character in Italy has meant debating a uniqueness fraught with liabilities. It has meant to impute some special virtues to the Italian people [...] but also, at the same time, to denounce their numerous “vices”. Patriarca, *Italian Vices*, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect*, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Capuana, ‘Un vampiro’, p. 295.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299. Emphasis in the text.

Virility and vampirism also characterise a novel mentioned in chapter three, D'Annunzio's *L'innocente*, where the complex interaction between these two motifs and their implications in political discourses are worth discussing. The libertine and unfaithful Tullio discovers that his wife Giuliana is pregnant by another man. He cannot condemn her on moral grounds, but he is horrified and repulsed by the fact that she has been irremediably tainted. The figure of Tullio's illicit son, an intruder who threatens to infiltrate and destroy the protagonist's entire world, progressively takes on vampiric attributes. Already during the pregnancy of Giuliana, the vampire seems to signal its spiritual presence:

le tende si gonfiavano sbattendo, e una candela ardeva su un tavolo, contro uno specchio; e, non so perché, lo sbattito delle tende, l'agitazione disperata di quella fiammella, che lo specchio pallido rifletteva, presero nel mio spirito un significato sinistro, aumentarono il mio terrore.<sup>89</sup>

Before the birth of the child, Tullio is unable to dispel the impression that something abnormal and disturbing is growing inside the body of Giuliana:

mi volsi ancora verso l'alcova, con un moto repentino, come se avessi sentito uno sguardo sopra di me. Mi parve che le cortine ondeggiassero [...] qualche cosa come un'onda magnetica a traverso le cortine veniva a penetrarmi; qualche cosa a cui non resistevo. Entrai nell'alcova una seconda volta, rabbrivendo'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio, *L'innocente* [1891] (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

Superficially ‘non v’appariva segno di contaminazione’, Tullio says, but the vampiric presence is made increasingly evident through the progressive deterioration of Giuliana’s physical and psychological conditions: shortly before the birth, she is described as ‘adagiata sui guanciali, pallida come la sua camicia, quasi esanime’.<sup>91</sup> Immediately after, ‘sembrava morta, più pallida del suo guanciaie, immobile’. The amount of blood that she has lost is enormous – ‘grandi macchie di sangue rosseggiavano sul letto, macchie di sangue tingevano il pavimento’ – but she is eventually able to survive.<sup>92</sup> The child, on the contrary, is extraordinarily vigorous, potent, and vital – the obstetrician repeatedly exclaims ‘guardi che maschio!’ – as if he had fully consumed his mother’s life force.<sup>93</sup> The child, who for Tullio directly signifies adultery and aberrant sexual behaviour, represents a crucial element in revealing the protagonist’s progressive and dramatic loss of virility. The evil nature of the child-vampire, who ‘non aveva aspetto umano’, is subtly yet constantly implied by the narrator.<sup>94</sup> Precisely as in another contemporary short story involving vampirism such as Morando’s ‘Vampiro Innocente’ (1885) – where a widowed father murders his son as soon as he realises that the latter is taking on the form of a vampire, absorbing the vital essences of his sister and eventually killing her – in *L’innocente* Tullio must kill the monstrous intruder in order to recover his masculinity and, as a direct consequence, to survive.<sup>95</sup>

Ultimately, in these texts, the focus on male vampires deflects attention from the real menace that subtly underlies them. Even when pushed into the background, female

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., pp. 123, 206.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>95</sup> Francesco Ernesto Morando (1858-1935) was a writer, journalist, and literary scholar. His *Studi di letteratura e storia* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1937) is probably his most famous work. The short story ‘Vampiro innocente’ was originally published on the pages of the journal *Fanfulla della domenica* (33, August 16 1885, pp. 3-4).



sexuality re-emerges by the backdoor, acting like a spectre that powerfully threatens the very essence of what it means to be masculine and, as a corollary, bringing into question the credibility and stability of the body politic. Questioning these men's virility, their ability to cater for their families, or to defend their women from the attack of foreign forces, can thus be interpreted as a reflection of Italy's own intrinsic weakness, lack of power, authority, and diplomatic weight. In the context of the highly masculine-gendered Italian public sphere, ultimately, these texts of popular fiction do not simply reflect cultural anxieties. Rather, by trying to manage and contain these fears and concerns, Italian writers aggravate them, deeply intruding upon science, manipulating its most controversial outcomes, and shaping contemporary debates about family, gender, and sexuality.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen, the interaction between crime, detection, and the supernatural in Italian literature from the mid nineteenth century to the early twentieth century assumes a myriad of different connotations and captures the unstable and ever-changing relationship between science, human reason, religion, and the occult world. While in the mid nineteenth century the resurgence of occult practices helped to revitalise the old paradigm of divine detection, towards the *fin-de-siècle* religion gradually lost its power in the association with the otherworld, being overtaken by science. However, the relationship between scientism and occultism was, however, particularly conflicting, and such tension largely informed the literary landscape. Many late nineteenth-century crime stories exploit the supernatural as a transitory explanation, staging an apparently inexplicable series of events only to reaffirm the power of science through final, entirely natural and

rational resolutions. Other stories, instead, not only challenge the reliability of science, but also cast doubt over the very potential of literature to take over from science and to convey indisputable truths. Finally, this chapter has uncovered the close relationship between vampirism, female sexuality, and politics, showing how in the highly masculine-gendered Italian public sphere the male vampire intercepts anxieties concerning the threatening female body and the instability of the new body politic.

In conclusion, on the one hand, the concurrent presence within these texts of rational and supernatural elements, of Catholic rhetoric, Gothicism, and modernity, bespeaks the hybrid status of crime fiction and the ambivalent nature of nineteenth-century culture, where different approaches to crime and punishment coexisted. On the other hand, it can be seen that the transition from supernatural forms of inquiry to purely scientific investigations, which depend exclusively on the superior faculties and training of the detective or the physician, was never fully realised. The spectre of the barbarous, the irrational, and the unknown continued to loom large over the country and never ceased to constitute an obstacle in its slow, laborious process of modernisation.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion in the foregoing chapters has illuminated the often wholly overlooked formal and moral diversity of Italian crime narratives in the period that spans approximately between 1861 and 1914. This thesis has challenged reductive and essentialist accounts of the genealogy of Italian crime fiction, which have described early configurations of the form as somehow more detached from its milieu and less gritty than the later 1970s and 1990s incarnations. The literary landscape of crime writing in Italy was, and still is, a contested terrain, a field of cultural conflict marked by lingering ideological and aesthetical tensions. Far from being merely escapist and detached from reality, I have argued that the vast corpus of crime and detective stories that appeared in these years articulate a wide range of moral and formal positions and speak to many of the issues and anxieties that specifically troubled Italian society. On one hand, dominant ideas and deep-seated critical prejudices about the cultural work that popular genres performed in the nineteenth century must be reconsidered. On the other hand, the common assumption of a somewhat unproblematic transition of the genre from *giallo*, which focuses on the enigma, to *noir*, which focuses on the social context, has been definitively proven unfounded.

Given its close relationship with positivist criminology, early Italian crime fiction becomes involved in the negotiation for power that was at the heart of the many scientific communities in these years. Fictions of crime reflect the contemporary scientific world, but it has also been my contention that they contribute to the construction of science within popular imagination. As a scientific discipline, positivist criminology is not a separate entity working on its own terms; rather, it is a form of knowledge production whose fresh understandings both affect and are influenced by wider society and culture.

There is, then, a continuously cyclical process of influence and self-reflection within criminological, literary, and cultural disciplines that constitute a complex channel of intercommunication.

This brief, last section provides further reflections and invites further research. As a matter of fact, there is much more to do. For instance, many more nineteenth-century texts and writers, from the most famous to the virtually unknown, would repay systematic investigation from more flexible perspectives and through new critical tools, and much more needs to be discovered in terms of production and consumption, publishers and readerships. As we have seen in chapter one, the early twentieth-century prescriptive view of the *giallo* as rooted in pre-modern enigma stories – which suggests that scientific rationality constitutes the guiding principle of the genre – was largely undisputed in Italy for many years. It comes as no surprise that in the intellectual and cultural climate of post-World War II, such a formally codified and conservative view of the genre came to be perceived as increasingly unfashionable and unable to scrutinise and understand contemporary society. The history and analysis of the *giallo* conceived by Leonardo Sciascia, one of the most renowned exponents of late twentieth-century Italian crime fiction, is an excellent case in point. After a series of articles written in the 1950s, Sciascia published the comprehensive *Breve storia del romanzo poliziesco* in 1975.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, the writer excludes the Italian novel entirely from his consideration, with the cursory exceptions of Mario Soldati and Carlo Emilio Gadda, and focuses exclusively on foreign authors, from Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie.<sup>2</sup> He carefully avoids mentioning himself in the implicit attempt to detach his writing from that of the abovementioned popular novelists, whose works are largely stigmatised as escapist reading and as products

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<sup>1</sup> Leonardo Sciascia, 'Letteratura del giallo', *Letteratura*, 3 (1953), 65-7; 'La carriera del Maigret', *Letteratura*, 10 (1954), 73-5; 'Appunti sul giallo', *Nuova corrente*, 1 (1954), 23-34.

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph Farrell, 'Literature and the *Giallo*: Gadda, Eco, Tabucchi and Sciascia', in *Italian Crime Fiction*, pp. 48-72 (pp. 48-9).

of low cultural value. Conversely, those who Sciascia considers as writers of high literature who venture into the territory of crime fiction, including Soldati, Gadda, and obviously himself, are seen as authors who appropriate crime fiction tropes and structures to write relevant, meaningful novels. Current distinctions between *giallo* and *noir*, highbrow and lowbrow examples of crime writing, can be envisaged in Sciascia's writing, which has played a major role in shaping future debates and discussions surrounding the genre. It would be interesting, in this respect, to analyse the new and invasive processes of canonisation of *noir* writing that have taken place in Italy since the end of World War II, which instead of enlarging the canon of crime fiction and problematising its development have further solidified critical prejudices about the boundary between elitist and popular culture.

Chapter two has provided materials to understand how nineteenth-century politics and science built an underclass made of deviants that had to be identified scientifically in order to be excluded socially. The chapter has analysed a selected number of post-unification texts that appropriate realism in service of a larger social reform agenda, in the attempt to raise awareness for the condition of the lower classes and to redress poverty and backwardness. The outcome, as we have seen, was extremely ambiguous. Italian authors address and explore similar socio-political concerns, from class fluidity to degeneration and infectiousness, exploiting the rhetoric of the Gothic with the paradoxical effect of demonising a vast range of racial and cultural others – not only criminals, but also vagrants, lunatics, prostitutes, and others – against whom they could, perhaps unconsciously, express their fears, grievances, and concerns about the country. Currently, there is much debate about the role of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century theorisations of the positivist school in influencing and providing scientific foundations for Fascist politics in the interwar period. Mary Gibson correctly suggests

that ‘positivism and fascism shared ideological affinities. Both promoted surveillance, classification, and discipline’.<sup>3</sup> To imply, as many have done, the existence of a direct link between Lombrosian theories and Fascist and Nazi politics of extermination is much more hazardous and questionable.<sup>4</sup> For one thing, Lombroso was neither a totalitarian (he was a liberal and socialist) nor an anti-Semite (obviously, being Jewish himself). Moreover, the trajectory that led positivism to Fascism was not an unavoidable one. When Fascism took over in 1922, Lombroso’s daughters Gina and Paola with their husbands Guglielmo Ferrero and Mario Carrara either went into exile abroad or lost their chairs at the university. There was no consonance between positivist and both Fascist and Nazi views on politics of regeneration. Far from adopting the ‘Nordic’, hereditary eugenic model that many positivists had long been advocating, since the late 1920s Italian Fascism promoted Catholic-oriented, neo-Lamarckian, and quantitative eugenics.<sup>5</sup> The anthropologist and Lombroso’s disciple Giuseppe Sergi repeatedly attacked German negative eugenics, which consisted in the suppression of the ‘unfit’, while Niceforo wrote at great length to debunk the myth of Aryanism, which he argued was used as propaganda for German superiority.<sup>6</sup> Positivism, then, did not automatically produce Fascism; rather,

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<sup>3</sup> Gibson, *Born to Crime*, p. 212.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Friedlander, for example, suggests that ‘the Nazi killers used the language of Lombroso to target the same victim groups’. Richard Weikart claims that positivist theories fed dictatorial regimes such as Nazism in Germany after the end of World War I, which spread the idea that only through racial extermination could humanity improve biologically and advance to higher cultural levels, since the lower races were not mentally capable of producing culture. Likewise, Joseph Crawford notes that, within the Gothicised discourses of positivist science, the otherness of marginalised groups appeared not as relative and situational ‘but as innate and essential, the result of a basic, ineffable monstrousness that could be erased only by extermination’. See Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide. From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 3; Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler. Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 203; Joseph Crawford, *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Fear in the Age of the Reign of Terror* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> See Francesco Cassata, ‘Biotypology and Eugenics in Fascist Italy’, in *The ‘New Man’ in Radical Right Ideology and Practice 1919-1945*, ed. by Matthew Feldman, Jorge Dagnino, and Paul Stocker (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 39-63 (p. 39).

<sup>6</sup> Caglioti, ‘Race, Statistics and Italian Eugenics’, p. 469.

as Angelo Caglioti has contended, the Fascist regime used the expertise of the old positivist group as long as it was useful for Mussolini's goals. Considering the ambiguous interaction between science and popular fiction – with certain literary texts that, as I have argued, may have influenced the direction of future anthropological research – an intriguing line of enquiry might be the role of the literary sphere in the debates that marked the period leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, particularly with a focus on race and eugenics.

Chapter three has revealed the extraordinary infiltration of criminological theories concerning the nature and mind of delinquents within fictions of crime. On the one hand, I have shown how such literature was able to capture a fast-changing cultural climate in relation to what was increasingly perceived as aberrant sexual conduct. This in turn fuelled popular anxieties surrounding homosexuality, which found its most terrible conclusion in the intense politics of repressions perpetrated in the following years during the regime. On the other hand, through a series of case studies I have argued how anxieties concerning inborn mental issues and their implications for criminal behavior suffused nineteenth-century Italian literature, which exposes and critiques the ambiguities of positivist criminology and its inability to provide a single, universal law of delinquency. What is remarkable is that the spectral presence of the biology of crime, which lay dormant for the largest portion of the twentieth century, has now resurfaced to haunt contemporary manifestations of crime writing. This reflects the trajectory of Lombroso's thought and work in Italy, which was often misrepresented, ridiculed, obscured, and rejected shortly after his death in 1909. From the 1980s, though, behavioural genetics and neuroscience have brought back a revised version of the Lombrosian idea of criminal

heredity.<sup>7</sup> This research has been impacting legal proceedings worldwide, and especially in Italy, where for the first time in Europe it affected court decisions. Comprehensibly, this new approach, now referred to as *neurolaw*, has been accused of being basically neo-Lombrosian and received a number of criticisms. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, much Italian crime fiction today deals with serial killers and problematises issues of genetics applied to criminal profiling. Critical investigations in this direction might as well be extremely effective for examining the way in which contemporary cultural and popular imaginations reflect on, conceptualise, and deal with epistemological questions involving the nature of evil.

Chapter four has challenged traditional views that see both popular genres in general and nineteenth-century crime and detective fiction in particular as conservative, reassuring, and merely possessing the power to placate cultural anxieties and displace them into the realm of fantasy. I have contested these claims, revealing the unconventional, antiauthoritarian, and even subversive nature of early Italian detective-centred stories, showing the divergent reactions of writers towards positivist criminology's appropriation of technologies for the identification of criminals and the medicalisation of society. We have encountered numerous texts that are not always uncomplicated in moral or epistemological terms, in which justice is not reached, knowledge is not attained, and heroic detectives are nearly killed. More generally, this analysis has shown how many of the traits that make twentieth and twenty-first century Italian crime fiction significant and worthwhile, from the complex relationship between law and justice to its social function, have always characterised the form in its previous manifestations. In this respect, a systematic study of the vast corpus of popular authors

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<sup>7</sup> See Isabella Merzagora, *Colpevoli si nasce? Criminologia, determinismo, neuroscienze* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2012); Emilia Musumeci, *Cesare Lombroso e le neuroscienze: un parricidio mancato* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2012).



such as Mastriani and Piccini could be extremely useful in finally demonstrating how their work was far from disengaged and merely escapist as critics have repeatedly suggested.

Finally, chapter five has looked at detective fiction from the perspective of the supernatural, exploring the complex interaction between scientific, esoteric, and divine forms of enquiry. These apparently irreconcilable patterns intertwine and sometimes overlap with the result of creating effects of tension and surprise that subvert readers' expectations. There is not, ultimately, a simple replacement of old with new paradigms of thought, but rather a constant struggle for the central ground from which power can be exercised. In critical literature, the study of the occult in Italian culture has been largely overlooked. This gives critics the opportunity of taking a variety of different paths and surveying often neglected historical moments, from Fascist Italy to the virtually unexplored period that extends between the French Revolution and the early years of the *Risorgimento*.

As I have stressed in the introduction, I believe it is extremely important for the future development of Italian studies to be able to incorporate new critical approaches that may enable scholars and students alike to reconsider dominant perceptions of popular genres and forms. With this study, I have sought to take a small step in this direction. Hopefully, more scholars with expertise in both early modern and contemporary periods, but also in Italian cinema, will be able to take up the challenge and contribute to breaking the boundaries between high and popular culture once and for all. The time, perhaps, is ripe.

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